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STERILIZED

THE  
TWO UNDERTAKERS

By FRANCIS BEEDING

No 182



HODDER & STOUGHTON

XV



*The characters in this book are entirely imaginary  
and have no relation to any living person.*



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I EMPTIED my *stein*, called for another and looked once more into the Platzl. The morning was warm and fine; the season was late September, the 27th to be exact; and the air gave promise that St. Martin would not be cheated of his summer. Dust, chased in spirals by a light breeze, was dancing down the street and Munich was pleasant to look upon.

I was sitting in one of the arched windows of the Hofbrauhaus, in whose dark halls men had grasped beer-pots, and drunk and swore, and quarrelled and sung *Lieder* for four hundred years.

I had been at my table for some twenty minutes looking through the local papers. Several further bankruptcies were recorded; the number of young men in the big cities who had never had any work to do, and were unlikely ever to find their way to an office or factory, was steadily increasing; European statesmanship appeared to be as bankrupt as the private financiers who were shooting themselves daily. Finally, there had been another

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of the appalling accidents which had recently become so alarmingly frequent in the German public services, and it was openly suggested in more than one of the sheets at which I had looked that they must be the work of an organised gang of wreckers. For no apparent reason a big passenger plane flying from Munich to Berlin had crashed shortly after taking off from the aerodrome, and six passengers and the two pilots had been killed outright.

I discarded the newspapers and sat idle in the window.

I had come to the Hofbrauhaus for two reasons. First, I had an appointment. It was essential that I should not be late; but it was possible that the Fräulein Hilda von Esseling would not be early. Therefore I had chosen a place where waiting had its compensations. Secondly, I was suffering from an exaggerated sense of duty. Officially I was on leave; but no agent of the British Intelligence Service (Secret Branch) ever feels entirely his own master, and he is expected, though not absolutely bound, upon arrival in a new town to look in at monthly headquarters. There is one spot in every main city of Europe where he can meet his colleagues. It changes every month and is communicated to each one of us together with the code word in use. Ours is



a lonely service, and we must perforce help each other how and when we can.

It was accordingly only right and proper, the Hofbrauhaus being our place of meeting for September, that I should have chosen it for my rendezvous. So far, however, none of my comrades had shown face or given the signal whereby he might be recognised. I had pricked up an official ear when the pot-boy had started whistling "Love me Quick and Pass Along"—the tune of the month. But everybody whistled that particular air and he had omitted to sneeze in the middle of the fourth bar, which was the real crux of the matter.

My appointment, as I have mentioned, was with Hilda von Esseling, and I had something of such importance to say to her that at the mere thought of it my mouth went dry and the tongue clove. Suppose she would have none of me? What man in love can be sure or even entertain a reasonable hope as the fatal moment approaches?

How to begin? The direct attack or the gradual approach? Was it really wise to aim at paradise in broad daylight—in this September sunshine, with the common life of the old city streaming past? Would it not be better perhaps to wait for moonlight and the quiet flow of the Isar through her father's park? Or perhaps

some dewy morning as we rode together under great trees on shining turf?

Who was Ronald Briercliffe—for it is he that asks you to accept this tale as a serious contribution to current history—to imagine that Hilda von Esseling might be induced to consider him? I could at least comfort myself—and cold comfort it was—that she knew the worst. I had made no secret of the fool I had been. Drunk on parade . . . disgraced on King's guard . . . flung from the regiment with ignominy. Was it really only two years ago all that had happened? But the shadow had been removed. For I had been offered, and I had taken, a second chance. That strange affair of the Three Fishers had set me right with the world, and that even more dreadful business of the Jesuit and the amethyst—the first case in which I had worked under Colonel Granby—had completed my apprenticeship. I was now committed to the perilous but obscure excitements of a new profession.

Once before—not long after the business of the Three Fishers—I had almost screwed my courage to the sticking-place. For Hilda von Esseling had herself been involved in that affair, and, in talking over our several dealings with one Francis Wyndham—of whom more hereafter—we had been drawn together by adventures shared



and dangers successfully overpast. I had even read a promise in her looks. Would she confirm it? In an hour I should be the happiest or most dejected of men. Of one thing I might be reasonably sure. If Hilda would have me the Graf, her father, would not stand in our way. He had asked me—in terms so warm that they could not but be sincere—to spend a month at Königstal. He smiled on my friendship with his daughter. Adoring her himself, he must have realised that I myself might also fall a victim; yet he had himself suggested in his letter to me that Hilda should pick me up in Munich and drive me to the castle.

I was tormenting myself with a final review of my chances, as I drank my beer and looked about me, when round the corner swung a well-worn two-seater at the wheel of which she sat. A light silk scarf floated about her throat, and from under a hat, perched at the back of her head, she smiled up at me where I sat in the window. The car pulled up with a scrunch of tyres as I jumped to my feet, but at that same instant appeared the inevitable policeman to warn her that parking was *verboten*. Hilda waved her hand at me, let in the clutch and disappeared round the corner. When she reappeared on foot, I was on the steps of the house awaiting her.

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She gave me both her hands, and I led her to my table in the window.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," she said, "but I knew it would be sorrow wasted."

She glanced down as she spoke at the foaming *stein* upon the table in front of me.

"Elevenses," I said. "An English custom."

"In our country," she retorted, "it is a custom that endures long after eleven o'clock. So it isn't too late for me."

She sat down and I beckoned to a passing waiter.

Then there fell a silence between us.

Hilda von Esseling was slim, not above medium height; her eyes were wide-set and blue; her hair flaxen; her nose very straight and fine. But items cannot do justice to the total. I will, therefore, omit the rest. It is of more consequence that, as I sat looking across at her that morning in the Hofbrauhaus, there was a shadow in her eyes, and she had ceased to smile.

"Worried?" I asked.

"My dear," she said, "who isn't?"

"Hard times," I admitted. "But is there a special reason?"

"Father takes things so much to heart. Don't forget, my dear, he is seventy-six next Tuesday.



These terrible accidents. . . . He is beginning to wonder whether they may not, after all, be somehow political."

She stretched out a hand across the table and touched mine lightly.

"I shall rely on you to brighten things up for him," she concluded.

"I am sorry he needs it."

"It has always been like that with father," she went on. "My country, oh, my country. He's feeling it terribly. It must be difficult for you to realise what it means to him or for that matter to any of us. Your England is still head-above-water, but here all is misery and depression and a sort of desperation. Don't forget that 17,000,000 people voted against having Hindenburg for President."

She paused and added :

"Then, too, there is Aunt Hilda."

"Aunt Hilda?" I echoed, and then perceived that Hilda—my Hilda—was wearing black. She read my thoughts and nodded.

"Yes," she said. "Aunt Hilda died only three days ago."

"Sorry," I began rather inadequately.

"Thank you, Ronald, but I can't pretend that it matters much to me. Aunt Hilda was over seventy and I hadn't seen her for fifteen years.

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But she was Daddy's sister, and has to be buried with the family like all the rest of them."

"She died at the castle?"

"No, that's the trouble. She died at her house near Baden-Baden. They have embalmed her and are sending the body down by train. The funeral will be to-morrow."

I looked at Hilda in dismay.

"Look here," I said, "hadn't I better come down after it is all over?"

"Nonsense," she responded firmly. "The funeral will take place in the morning and you can disappear. We still have one or two good horses left, if you'd care to ride."

"But your father—he won't be wanting strangers about the place."

"Strangers indeed! And in any case you're quite wrong. He needs taking out of himself."

"Was he very much devoted to his sister?"

"It isn't that. It's politics . . . politics . . . with hardly a thought for anything else. Then, as I said, these terrible accidents . . . three train smashes in the last fortnight, four of our passenger planes crashing for some unknown reason."

She pointed to the newspaper on the table.

"Another one this morning, as you see."

"Terrible indeed," came a voice from behind us.

I turned and saw standing beside my chair a small, spare man, with a lined, brown face in which were set two of the most piercing blue eyes in the world.

"I was never much of a hand at whistling," continued the small man, "but I can manage a sneeze."

"Granby," I exclaimed, and scrambled to my feet.

"Colonel Granby," I stammered, "this is Fräulein von Esseling."

Granby bowed.

"Colonel Granby is my Chief, Hilda," I explained.

"May I sit down?" asked Granby, looking at Hilda. "I must have speech with this young man."

What was Colonel Granby doing in Munich? And why must he have speech with me? Could it be that there was work to do? It was more than flesh and blood could bear. In another five minutes I should have been safely away with Hilda to the castle. I knew instinctively that the little man with the keen blue eyes, the lined face, and the neat, shabby clothes was about to spoil it all.

Even his clothes were ominous. He was dressed in old tweeds and he was wearing plus-



fours—the sort of clothes in which English tourists, for some unknown reason, see fit to appear when they travel abroad, though they would sooner be seen dead in them on the Flying Scotsman, and Colonel Granby was usually particular in these matters. One of Mr. Baedeker's invaluable red volumes protruded from a side pocket.

He sat down and beckoned to a waiter.

“Hannibal,” he said—“a pot of beer. And let it be capacious.” Granby calls all waiters Hannibal.

He spoke in bad German, with an atrocious English accent. That, again, was ominous, though I was careful not to show surprise. For Colonel Granby was a German scholar of no mean reputation, and could, in fact, have passed for a German anywhere, had he wished to do so. Evidently he played a part and meant to play it to the life—a hearty British tourist, travelling back after a summer spent in the Bavarian highlands.

“I am sorry, Fräulein,” he said, “but I simply have no choice in the matter. You must blame the profession.”

Hilda smiled at him quaintly and rose from her chair.

“You have business to discuss,” she said. “I will go and wait in the car.”

But Granby put a hand on her wrist.

"No, don't go, Fräulein," he begged. "It isn't much that I have to say."

"But I suppose it means a job of work for me," I grumbled.

Granby nodded.

"Your own fault, Ronald. If you *will* be conscientious . . ." His eyes twinkled and he put a hand suddenly on my shoulder.

"Good lad," he said. "But where is the beer?"

"It's at your elbow," I answered coldly.

"But not for long," responded Granby and, seizing the heavy stone tankard, he poured the contents straight down his throat, German fashion, to the great and patriotic satisfaction of Hilda von Esseling.

"I learned to do that in the old days at Heidelberg," said Granby. "*Wir werden einen Salamandar trinken.*"

"About these accidents," he went on, suddenly grave again. "I left Berlin the day before yesterday. The authorities are now convinced that they form part of a general plan; and I may tell you in confidence that the French and British Secret Services are co-operating with the German police in an effort to discover the criminals."

"The field is wide," said Hilda bitterly. "The time breeds everywhere the sort of men who stick at nothing."

"Your father also thinks that these crimes are political?" asked Granby.

"He can find no other explanation."

Granby was silent a moment.

"I saw to-day a gentleman who goes in for just such politics as these," he said at last.

He looked full at Hilda as he spoke.

"Francis Wyndham," he concluded abruptly.

Hilda went pale and then flushed with anger—as she always does at the mention of that evil name. We had suffered enough already at his hands, but that is an old story and there is now a new one to tell.

I had seized her hand under the table. It was not withdrawn. On the contrary, she grasped two of my fingers hard.

"Have you," I asked, "any reason to believe that Wyndham is mixed up in this devilish business?"

"No reason at all. But I don't mean to lose sight of him. That is why I came into this friendly house."

The sunshine seemed suddenly less golden and the room less kind. The shadow of Francis Wyndham—tall, fair-haired, aquiline, the mincing



man of steel, implacable, vain and very dangerous—had fallen across the morning. That he should still be free to walk about the world was a monstrous anomaly. But Francis Wyndham had usually so laid his plans that even when they failed to place him in the dock where he properly belonged his arrest must endanger cabinets and even kings. He had always taken good care that, if caught and made to pay the penalty, he should not fall alone. So the penalty had never yet been paid.

“Well,” I asked, “what do you want me to do?”

Granby was studying my face.

“Wyndham is my business,” he said. “But I have need of someone to follow up another small matter. I am waiting for a communication that has failed to reach me. X.42 reported four days ago that I might expect to receive a D. message from him within twenty-four hours. That message has not yet arrived and I must know the reason.”

I should perhaps explain that a D. message in the Service means that it is urgent and takes priority over all others.

“Where is X.42,” I asked, “and what is he doing?”

“At Rheinau in Alsace,” Granby replied. “He



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is acting as go-between for one of our agents who has been working in a cigarette factory—the big Sigma Works.”

He slipped a hand into his pocket and produced the Baedeker.

“Here you are,” he said. “Page 292. Study it in the train which you will catch in half an hour at the Central Station. Get as soon as possible into touch with X.42. Find out why he promised to send me a message and why it hasn’t come. Bring me back the answer as soon as you can and, if you can’t come, wire it in code. Then you will be free to continue your holiday, unless . . .”

He paused.

“... unless the waters are deeper than I care to think.”

I rose slowly from the table with bitterness in my heart.

“Just one other thing,” said Granby. “What will be your cover?”

“Mr. Percival Smooth,” I responded without enthusiasm. “I shall be travelling in face cream.”

Hilda looked at me suspiciously.

“What do you know of such things?” she asked.

“All about that schoolgirl complexion. And I’ve got a lovely album of pictures Before and

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After. And I'm running a really marvellous depilatory as a side-line."

"So you see," said Granby, "it's no use hiding things."

"To whom do I wire?" I asked.

"Wire to me here, *poste restante*—name of Ponsonby," he replied.

"Sorry, Hilda," I began, but she was already on her feet.

"I'll run you to the station," she said. "No need to waste good money on taxis."

I turned back to Granby.

"What are you doing about Wyndham?" I asked.

Granby smiled.

"That is my affair. I hope it will so remain."

I looked at them both, standing for a moment in silence. Then Hilda came quickly to me and put both her hands on my arms.

"I'll be waiting for you at Königstal," she said.

## CHAPTER II. I MEET THE MIGHTY MAGISTRO

HALF an hour later I was seated in the train on my way to Strassburg. The best I could do was to hope that my sudden return to duty had suitably impressed Hilda with the nobility of my

disposition and my importance in the general scheme of things, for I wanted above everything else in the world to impress Hilda.

As Mr. Percival Smooth, the representative of Messrs. Denison & Company, I was travelling second class in the company of two despondent men also in commerce. We rolled diligently across Bavaria, making for Augsburg and Ulm. The train, fortunately enough, was fast and I expected to reach Strassburg at about half-past ten in the evening. I reckoned that it would be possible to meet X.42 early on the following morning, conclude my business with him and return in time to be again in Munich late the same night.

My spirits rose. After all, I might not be missing so much. For Hilda would be necessarily much preoccupied during my absence with the funeral of Aunt Hilda, and with any luck I should be with her again as soon as I could decently hope to claim her undivided attention.

I held in my hand the red-covered volume of Baedeker's Schwarzwald, open at page 292. So far I had done no more than glance at the neat notes pasted on the page, for my thoughts were still at Königstal. The time had come, however, to concentrate upon the matter in hand. I must forget Hilda, radiant and assured, and think



instead of a wizened little Belgian, name of Monnier, if I remembered rightly. He had been a Belgian refugee in England and, growing enamoured of the country of his adoption, had applied for, and obtained, naturalisation. He was well known to the Service as a discreet, if somewhat unimaginative, member, his chief quality being an extreme precision. He had hardly ever failed to do what he promised—a fact which made the non-arrival of his message the more significant. There would seem to be no special difficulty in sending a communication from Strassburg to Munich in time of peace. He might, in fact, quite easily have posted it. Nevertheless, Granby had waited in vain for over forty-eight hours, with the result that here I was, rolling through the pleasant land of Bavaria to discover the reason.

Why, in any case, was X.42 taking an interest in the Sigma cigarette factory at Rheinau? I knew nothing of that seemingly respectable establishment, except that its products were to be obtained from any tobacco kiosk in Germany or for that matter in Europe. It was, I believed, a French concern, but Sigma cigarettes and Sigma cigars, advertised on huge posters in blue and gold lettering, were everywhere to be seen. Such an advertisement had, in fact, inevitably

met my eye when I had stepped into the train at Munich. And there would certainly be another staring me in the face at Augsburg.

Granby's notes pasted in the Baedeker (page 292) were written in a thin, neat hand with very black ink and a mapping pen. X.42 was not actually employed in the Sigma factory, but was working outside in a local garage of which the proprietor—name of Burkhardt—was a retired member of the French Service and always willing to lend a hand. There was someone working in the factory, however—a person who went by the name of Françoise. She was not unknown to me—so that, as I read, my pulses quickened. I had dined with Françoise discreetly once or twice in London. She was one of our star turns—a lady of very definite allurements. I had a clear picture of her in my memory with the shaded lights of Kettner's shining on her yellow hair and upon her exquisitely formed hands, with a cigarette-holder between the fingers.

Françoise was the widow of one of our agents who during the war had been caught behind the lines and had suffered the penalty. Since his death her one passion had been to carry on her husband's work. She had joined our Service in his place and had worked brilliantly, steadily, with a dry, unwavering intensity of purpose. It



was she who had unmasked the Swiss Federal Councillor who had been protecting the notorious Radich and his horde of Moscow Soviet agents. Her sorrow had not marred her physically. She looked always the same—not a year older than twenty-six or seven. That was Françoise. Her code name I had forgotten and her real name I had never known.

Françoise, then, was working in the Sigma cigarette factory and, from time to time, she was handing over information to Monnier. That was all I could gather. Of the nature of her information or of her reasons for working in the factory there was not a word. Granby's notes were entirely non-committal—a circumstance which was not unusual. It is our invariable rule that, when more than one man is employed on a job, each is allowed to know no more than just enough to carry out his part of the business. The pieces are fitted together in London, the risks of betrayal or discovery being thereby reduced to a minimum.

At Augsburg I decided, not without misgiving, to try the *Speisewagen*. Food on German railway trains, especially since the crisis, is not to be lightly undertaken. But I have always maintained the heresy that bad food is better than no food. So when the attendant's bell had sounded

I walked down the corridor, through several coaches full of third-class passengers consuming *Wurst* and other national delicacies. The *Speisewagen*, to my annoyance, was crowded. I had hoped to sit alone where I might gaze at the scenery, watch for the spires of Ulm and dream sweetly of Hilda. There was but one seat left in the car, however, and into that I promptly inserted myself.

I found myself sitting at a table for two. Opposite me was a large man, dressed in a grey suit of extravagant cut. His face was full; his eyes black and arrogant; about his chin there curled a magnificent Assyrian beard. He was examining the menu as though it had been some grave contract to which he had been asked to put his signature. He looked up as I took my seat.

"Is thy servant a pig?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon," I stammered in some confusion.

Then I realised that he was referring to the meal which we were about to share.

"Is it as bad as that?" I ventured, more from politeness than any desire for conversation.

"They have but one eatable dish in this country," he continued. "It is a saddle of wild boar served with chocolate and raisin sauce. I do not perceive it on the menu."



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He paused for comment but, receiving none, continued unabashed.

"Eating," he declared, "is one of the true measures of civilisation. The chronicler who portrayed the spectacular and tremendous fall of a mighty king chose precisely this criterion. Nebuchadnezzar in his glory was driven forth to eat the grass of the field."

The waiter stood beside us, offering the semblance of an *omelette aux fines herbes*, and the stranger paused to regard it with a pained astonishment.

"Well," he said, dipping nevertheless plentifully into the dish, "if we cannot eat, at least we can drink. The white wine of Germany has no equal, even in France. You will perhaps honour me, sir, by sharing a bottle of whatever they may have of Rhenish or Moselle."

"You are too kind," I murmured.

He waved a capable and delicate hand.

"A Piesporter, perhaps, would best effect our purpose— or, on second thoughts, a Liebfraumilch."

He summoned the waiter and made known his desires. The wine was brought and poured into green glasses. He raised his own and bowed.

"To your good health, sir."

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"To yours," I answered.

"A glass of wine," continued the stranger, "in the interior of a holy man is as a nightingale that sings in a cathedral. We are now in autumn, and the winter will soon be upon us. Yet here, imprisoned in this glass, is eternal spring."

I set down my glass.

"The wine, sir," I said, "does full justice to your opinion."

"The Rhine wines," recited the stranger rapidly, "may be classed under three main heads: those of the Rheingau, Hochheim and Rheinhessen districts. Of the Rheingau proper, the growths of the Rauenthal, Erbach, Marcobrunn, Hattenheim, Steinberg, Oestrod, Schloss Vollrads-Winkel, Johannisberg, Geisenheim and Rudesheim are the most renowned. Nor are the wines of the Palatinate—the Rheinpfalz—where the vine grows close to the ground, to be despised. These latter wines, however . . ."

But I was not to hear the rest of this discourse, for suddenly, without warning, the entire contents of a plate of *Wiener Schnitzel* struck against my chest. There was a wild screeching of brakes under my feet. I was thrown violently back against my seat and a second later the whole

## I MEET THE MIGHTY MAGISTRO

world crashed and splintered about me. For a moment I must, I think, have lost consciousness.

I came to myself to find that I was jammed between the remains of the seat on which I had been sitting, with the steel side of the coach bulging towards me and the remains of the table hanging somehow from the crumpled roof above my head. I was wedged helpless in a welter of broken glass, spoiled napery, spilt wine and food. The air was filled with steam, flapping cloths and, more terribly, with human cries. I feared to look about me, but, after one glimpse at the immediate ruin within reach of my arms, shut my eyes and ears.

In sudden panic I wondered whether I was badly hurt. The pain, they said, came after. I opened my eyes. That was blood on the tablecloth. God be praised, it was coming from my wrist. I put the wound to my mouth and sucked it. It was indeed nothing—the merest scratch.

I next made an effort to move. Should I have to lie there listening to the hiss of escaping steam and the cries of those less fortunate than myself until the rescue party came to cut me free? Then again a deadly fear struck at my heart, as I caught a smell of burning timber. Had the coach taken fire and were we all to be pinned down and



roasted? I moved a little wildly and something gave way—nothing less than the whole side of the coach—and the next moment I was falling. There was a light pelting of small objects and fragments of wood upon gravel and, a second later, I was crawling on all-fours upon the permanent way.

I got shakily to my feet and looked about me. I found that I had fallen through the shattered window of the compartment, which was lying at a perilous angle on the summit of the coach in front of it. A light wind touched my face. I thought suddenly of my companion. What had become of him and of the other inmates of the dining-car? I must climb back into the coach and bear them a helping hand. To climb back, however, was easier said than done. It reared itself aloft, perched precariously; and I felt that at any moment it might come crashing down to earth.

I scrambled with difficulty towards the ragged gap from which I had fallen and put my head into the coach. The first thing I saw was the bottle of Liebfraumilch, miraculously unbroken, lying amidst the ruins of the table. But of the bearded stranger there was no sign. He, too, had escaped with most of the occupants through a hideous tangle of ripped steel and twisted

the coach, and, as I did so, heard in utter astonishment a faint voice calling me by name. I climbed over a shattered seat and, to my right, saw a vaguely familiar form lying on its back, a great curly beard sprouting upwards from the chin and the eyes closed. This was my stranger of the dining car. How had he found his way in there? The thought just brushed my consciousness. Had he called? How did he know my name? I looked again. Was he dead? A thin stream of blood was trickling across his forehead.

Again a voice from somewhere to the right and below me called my name . . . "Mr. Briercliffe . . . Mr. Briercliffe!" Somehow the formal prefix added to the horror of the appeal.

I turned from my stranger with the beard and found at last the person who was calling me. The voice came from a little man wedged between two of the seats almost immediately beneath me. One arm was pinioned behind his back and a portion of the side of the coach had fallen upon his legs. His eyes stared up at me and beads of sweat stood from his forehead.

For a moment I did not recognise him and then, with a leap of the heart, I saw who it was . . . Monnier . . . X.42.

"My God, man!" I said as I bent down and

put my hands on one of the seats in a futile effort to remove it.

He shook his head.

"It's no good," he almost whispered. "I'm done . . . back broken . . . Listen quickly before I go . . . I had a message . . . bend lower . . . Mr. Briercliffe . . . I've swallowed it."

"Swallowed it?" I echoed.

"Man with the beard," he whispered. "Behind you . . . thought he would get it. But something hit him just as he saw me. Then it was too late. I had swallowed it . . . message . . . capsule . . . inside."

He gasped and closed his eyes. I thought he was sped. But they opened once again.

"Tell Colonel Granby," he said. "It's Ruggiero . . . the Mighty . . . Mighty . . . Magistro."

I started at the name and looked instinctively back at the bearded stranger lying so still. But the voice of the dying man whistled reed-like in my ear.

"Françoise is dead . . . get the message . . . library."

He sighed deeply upon the last word and his head moved back a little. Into his eyes came a fixed uncomprehending stare. The lips moved once or twice, then fell apart.



I STOOD precariously upon a pile of wreckage looking down at the dead body of X.42. I was not yet hardened to the vicissitudes of my profession. A moment ago I had been drinking wine with a fantastic stranger. Next I had escaped death, savage and violent, by the breadth of a hair. I had then come within an ace of fulfilling my mission, only to meet again with death and to realise that the message for which I had been sent was lying in the body at my feet.

Monnier, in his precise and careful way, had obeyed the Service regulations. Messages that could not be memorised must be carried so that they might, if necessary, be concealed or destroyed. One of the commonest devices was to enclose them in a capsule which might be swallowed as you swallow a pill, the capsule being made of a substance that resisted digestion and could therefore be subsequently recovered.

Monnier, in the agony of his dissolution, had been true to his instructions.

I looked from the dead face of X.42 to the bearded countenance of the stranger lying beside him. So that was Ruggiero, otherwise known as the Mighty Magistro. I had never met or had



dealings with him personally. But I knew him well by repute and from what Granby had told me of him as principal ruffian in that notorious affair of the Bramber Bequest—ex-conjurer, at one time famous as the Human Encyclopædia, a noted mercenary among the secret agents of Europe. More than one European Government would jump at the possibility of putting him quietly and effectively out of the way, and there he lay, defenceless at my feet. What was one more dead man among all this litter of smashed humanity? But such is human nature that, though I knew that he had earned a hanging several times over and though I would have handed him over to justice with the sense of a good and useful service rendered to the community, the deliberate slaying of a helpless man in cold blood was altogether beyond me.

A genial malefactor, Granby had called him; but, for all his geniality, Monnier had evidently taken his measure as a dangerous and implacable adversary, for he had swallowed the message at the mere sight of him. Monnier must have discovered something vital and Ruggiero was implicated. The fact that X.42 had carried the message in a capsule not only showed that it was of the utmost importance but that he expected trouble in its delivery.

It had now to be recovered. I must act, and act quickly. I lifted the body of X.42 by the shoulders and laid it clear of the wreckage. Somehow I must get it removed to a place where an autopsy could be performed, though how on earth that was to be done amid all the horror and confusion surrounding me I had as yet not the faintest idea. My impulse was to remove the body as quietly as possible from the shambles, to stand by it and at all costs to assume a right to its possession.

Already some kind of order was being established. Men in field grey were moving up and down the shattered track. It appeared that a regiment of the Reichswehr on manœuvres had been providentially close to the scene of the accident and had been instantly commandeered for rescue work.

The two trains were lying across the double track, which at this point ran upon a slight embankment. To the right and left the country fell away fairly steeply, covered with pines, firs and other trees, for we had been running through the Black Forest. In the distance, perhaps half a mile away, I caught sight of the roofs and spires of a little town.

I picked up the body of X.42 and carried it across my shoulders. My task was not difficult,



## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

for the man was small and slight. For a moment I thought of carrying my burden into the woods and hiding it till I could come back and deal with the problem at my leisure. I had no time, however, to weigh the merits of that plan, as, before I had staggered as much as fifty yards, I was stopped by two men carrying a stretcher. They set it down beside me.

"We will take him on this," they said.

I laid down X.42 upon the stretcher. One of the men took a compassionate look at him and shook his head.

"Dead," he said, "we must give our time to the living."

"Friend of yours?" asked the other man.

"My brother," I said on a sudden impulse.

The first man looked at me with sympathy.

"Well," he said, "it doesn't look as though he could have suffered much. We will help you to put him with the rest."

They retraced their steps as they spoke, carrying the stretcher, and I followed them.

By the side of the track was lying a number of still figures. Some were covered with ends of tarpaulin, sacking or waterproof sheets. Additions were being made to the row every minute. The men set down X.42 at the end of it.

"Wait here," said one of the stretcher-



bearers. "No more rescue work for you. There are more than enough volunteers already."

I sat down on the embankment and watched the work progressing. The noise of escaping steam from the two wrecked locomotives drowned all other sounds. The September sun shone kindly down. The fields on each side of the track were full of late summer grass on which the cattle were browsing placidly.

I had waited perhaps twenty minutes, when a light engine appeared on the track, running from the direction of the town which I could just see. It stopped fifty yards or so from the wreckage and several men sprang from the brake-van. One of them I recognised by his uniform as a stationmaster. Two others were subordinate officials of the same category. I rose from my seat as one of them approached the line of dead.

"My brother," I repeated, as the man came up to me.

The man had a notebook.

"I am to take particulars of all the dead," he said. "They will be moved as soon as possible to the morgue at Offenburg."

"Then the town yonder is Offenburg?" I asked.

He nodded.

"How soon can my brother's body be moved?"

"We must look first to the injured," he said gently.

Over his shoulder I saw the light engine moving backwards. Its mission was accomplished and it was returning to the town.

"They are making up a relief train," went on the official. "It will be here in half an hour or so and there will be a coach at the end for . . . for these"—and he pointed to the long line of figures beside the track. "It is your brother, you say."

I gave him in haste such particulars as I could produce on the spur of the moment and felt a spasm of misgiving when the official impounded the passport of X.42, which he carefully labelled and put away in his bag.

He passed on with his notebook, bending above the dead, business-like and efficient. I had nothing to do but wait.

Time passed slowly, but in less than the promised half-hour the relief train came into view. It consisted of several third-class carriages and a van. Various railway officials and ambulances descended from it and the task of moving the injured began. I will pass over the next distressing hour. The sobbing women, the cries

of the injured, the haggard faces of the men, made a scene which is happily beyond the power of my memory to retain at all clearly. The dead came last of all and I obtained without difficulty permission to wait by the side of my adopted brother. It was twenty minutes past three in the afternoon when the train bearing myself and X.42 steamed slowly from the wreck.

The relief train was switched to a siding and the work of unloading the dead and injured began without delay. The station platform was crowded with Red Cross workers and officials of various kinds. Beyond the barriers, in the station yard, I could see a curious crowd kept back by the police. Over everything the autumn sunshine poured down, with men bending to the succour of their kind beneath its rays. The injured were carried to the first-class waiting-room, whence they were to be taken to the local hospital. The accident had fortunately occurred near a town large enough to cope, at any rate for the time being, with the shattered survivors, and nothing, I think, impressed me more in that bewildered moment than the extreme efficiency of the German officials. The injured were removed with a despatch that would have done credit to the staff of a hospital train during the war.



## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

I stood by the van in which I had travelled from the scene of the accident. A group of men, some of them in overalls, came up in charge of a railway foreman. One by one the sheeted dead were lifted, the first body to be taken out being that of X.42. I stood anxiously by the bier, an improvised stretcher of two poles and a blanket.

“Where will you put him?” I asked of the foreman.

The man pointed to a long shed, used on normal occasions, as I gathered, for storing the great tuns of Ortenauer wines, for which the town of Offenburg is an important market.

“Is it by any means possible,” I diffidently asked of the foreman in charge, as two of the men laid down their burden at one end of the long shed, “to see the stationmaster?”

“I fear you will have to wait some time,” said the man, “if you wish to speak to him personally.”

“Is there no one else in authority charged with the disposal of the dead?” I continued. “I have to make special arrangements. It is impossible that my brother should be buried here in your town.”

The foreman put his hand on my shoulder.

“I understand,” he answered, “but all this is

out of my province. The *Stellvertretender Bahnhofsvorsteher* will presently be here."

"Is there an undertaker in the town?" I ventured.

"The undertaker is Herr Wetzlar—a very enterprising gentleman. This is a good day for him. I am pretty sure he will come to the harvest."

He turned away and continued his sad task, leaving me to consider my next move.

I dared not leave the body of X.42. For Ruggiero was not among the dead—at any rate, not among those who had come to their rest in the long shed. Was he, perhaps, among the injured? I was not going to assume it easily, but to take all possible precautions.

I must have waited little more than an hour before the *Stellvertretender Bahnhofsvorsteher* (in plain English the under-stationmaster) appeared. He was in uniform and his little blue eyes twinkled from behind his spectacles.

"Sad . . . very sad," he muttered. "Your brother, as I understand."

"Yes," I said. "I wish to remove the body as soon as possible. If it is a question of payment . . ."

The under-stationmaster spread wide his hands.

“That can be arranged,” he assured me. “But we must be patient. It cannot all be done in a minute. You do not wish him to be buried in our beautiful town?”

“Alas!” I said, “our parents live in Munich. They would certainly wish him to be taken there.”

He looked at me inquisitively.

“The Herr is not German,” he observed, for my German, though good, is not perfect.

I shook my head.

“Belgian,” I answered.

He dived into a black leather bag and produced the passport of X.42.

“Yes,” he said. “It is quite in order. Henri Monnier is your brother’s name?”

I nodded.

“And your own?”

“Gustave Monnier,” I replied.

The under-stationmaster looked at the body of X.42. Then he beckoned to two of his men and gave them an order which I did not catch. The two men lifted the body.

“Where are you taking him?” I asked in swift alarm. The under-stationmaster raised a fat hand.

“You need be under no apprehension,” he answered. “I am having him moved nearer to



my office. If you will be good enough to accompany me thither, I will telephone for the local undertaker, Herr Wetzlar—if he has not already arrived. Herr Wetzlar does not neglect his opportunities.”

Walking down the long platform I noticed that the crowd was beginning to disperse. The injured were being rapidly driven away as we entered the neat little office of the under-stationmaster, with its roll-topped desk, maps hanging on the wall, typewriter and other office furniture.

A lean and melancholy man rose abruptly from his chair, clicked his heels and bowed elegantly from the waist. He was dressed in deepest black and carried a bowler hat.

The under-stationmaster looked at him without approval.

“Herr Wetzlar,” he said dryly. “I thought we should be seeing you.”

The lean man bowed again, pressing his bowler hat grotesquely against his meagre person, then abruptly shot out a thin hand containing a large pasteboard card. I took it mechanically and read, among other and sadder matters, that his terms were strictly moderate.

The under-stationmaster rapidly conveyed to Herr Wetzlar an account of my necessities. The lugubrious face brightened perceptibly.

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

"So the Herr has lost his brother," he said. "Sad . . . very sad. . . . He wishes his brother to be transported to Munich."

Herr Wetzlar paused to stroke a lantern chin.

"That, of course, is feasible," he continued. "The body will have to be embalmed."

"Embalmed," I stammered. "I had not thought . . ."

Herr Wetzlar lifted a sable arm.

"The Herr need be under no apprehension. Embalming as practised nowadays is a simple and inexpensive process. We have only to inject a certain preparation into the vascular system. It is not necessary to remove any of the . . . er . . . organs."

I sighed with relief. Another reef—this one uncharted—had been passed successfully.

"Then I should be glad if you would make all the necessary arrangements without loss of time," I said.

Herr Wetzlar looked at me doubtfully.

"The Herr Monnier would doubtless like an estimate. I shall be responsible for all the necessary charges and transport is costly. For, alas! it is dearer to travel dead than alive."

"It is not a question of expense," I said, "but of time. How soon would you be ready?"

Herr Wetzlar considered a moment.

"We might arrange it for to-morrow," he said.

"Is it not possible for us to travel this evening?" I urged. "Is there no night train to Munich?"

The under-stationmaster shook his head.

"There are the regulations to be considered," he observed.

I looked to Herr Wetzlar for an explanation.

"Under the regulations," said Herr Wetzlar, "all bodies travelling by train must be accompanied by a *Leichnambegleiter* or corpse conductor. I do not know whether I can find a man at such short notice."

"But surely," I protested, "if I accompany the body myself . . ."

"Impossible," said the under-stationmaster. "The *Leichnambegleiter* is a servant of the company. He is responsible to us for the conduct and safe delivery of the deceased."

"I'm sorry to insist," I said. "But I am most anxious to spare my parents any unnecessary pain. If they have to wait for several days, they will have time to brood and to imagine things."

"Of course . . . of course," said the under-stationmaster helplessly. Then, suddenly he brightened.



“One moment, if you please.”

He took up a pile of railway telegrams from his desk, turned them over and swung round to me in triumph.

“The Herr is fortunate,” he beamed. “By a happy chance a body is due to come through this station by the 7.53 this evening. It is from Baden-Baden, and it is, of course, in the charge of a *Leichnambegleiter*. If Herr Wetzlar can have the mortal remains of your dear brother ready for delivery to us here at 7.50 it might perhaps be possible.”

Herr Wetzlar again stroked a lantern jaw.

“I think I could arrange it,” he said. “But I must warn the Herr that it is an expensive matter to be thus urgent. Shall we say, perhaps, 1500 marks inclusive?”

The under-stationmaster handed me in silence the pocket-book of Henri Monnier. I understood the gesture and opened it. Inside were notes for more than 2000 marks.

The little man had enough to pay his fare.

“That will be quite all right,” I said, and turned away to hide a sudden rush of tears to my eyes—no acted sorrow but an abrupt, overwhelming sense of irony and loss. Partly perhaps they came as well from a sudden sharp sense of relief. For it seemed that I was to get safely

away and to fulfil my mission. The strain on my nerves, unexpectedly released, left me weak and trembling.

But, even as I turned aside, there came a fall of steps and the door of the office was flung wide.

"One moment, gentlemen," said a voice.

I wheeled about.

Standing on the threshold, a white bandage about his head, his great beard jutting at the sun, his eyes alert and arrogant, stood the Mighty Magistro.

## CHAPTER IV.

## I LOSE THE DECEASED

HE came deliberately into the room, taking—rather pointedly—no notice whatever of me but moving straight towards the under-stationmaster, who had risen to his feet, an involuntary tribute to the tremendous presence of the intruder, whose arrival seemed to transform that little office into the cabinet of a Minister or the private parlour of some prince of the Renaissance. The soiled wall-paper, chequered with railway maps, schedules, public notices and regulations, was seen as a stately tapestry. The very chairs and tables were transfigured.

"I regret to trouble you," said the Mighty

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

Magistro, addressing the under-stationmaster, "but my business is urgent. I should, indeed, have come to you sooner but for my accident."

He raised his hands as he spoke and touched the white bandage wound about his head.

"But that is a trifle here," he continued mournfully. "I must, indeed, apologise for mentioning an even more painful matter. I realise how busy you must be upon this tragic and terrible occasion, and yet I must make so bold as to ask you to divert your attention for a moment from the living to the dead."

The rounded periods rolled in faultless German from his lips. His chin was thrust out, his beard floated across his great chest and in his hands was an ebony stick with an ivory top.

"Certainly, Mein Herr," faltered the under-stationmaster. "What can I do for you?"

Ruggiero waved a hand in my direction, affecting to notice me for the first time.

"One moment," he said. "This gentleman, perhaps, still has business to conduct with you?"

I stepped forward and bowed slightly in the direction of the Mighty Magistro. He looked at me keenly and raised his hand in a dramatic gesture of recognition.



"Is it possible," he exclaimed, "that I see my friend of the luncheon car? We little thought that our conversation would be so tragically interrupted."

"I should be delighted to resume it at the earliest opportunity," I said. "Meantime, if you will kindly allow me to finish my business here..."

Ruggiero bowed and I turned to Herr Wetzlar, who still stood with his bowler hat across his stomach.

"Perhaps we can more conveniently discuss the details of our . . . er . . . transaction outside," I suggested.

"One moment," said Ruggiero, "if I may for an instant interrupt. I have the honour, perhaps, to address Herr Wetzlar, Oldenburg's premier mortician."

Herr Wetzlar stepped forward eagerly, bowed mechanically from the waist and produced yet another of his business cards.

The Mighty Magistro regarded it a moment and handed it back.

"Thank you, Herr Wetzlar. I was told I should find you here. When you have concluded your business with this gentleman I shall hope to secure your attention."

"Certainly, Mein Herr," replied the man, highly gratified.

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It was then that the under-stationmaster most disastrously intervened. He had seated himself behind his desk, whence he bent politely forward.

"Herr Monnier," he said, "I will, as you suggest, leave you to discuss your arrangements with Herr Wetzlar, who will duly notify me when they are completed. I will myself, personally, see that the body of your brother is placed on the train."

I looked aside at Ruggiero. At the name of Monnier he had started violently—a dramatic gesture which did not intend to be overlooked.

"Monnier," he exclaimed. "Do I understand, sir, that your name is Monnier?"

He looked me very full in the face as he spoke.

"Certainly," I said. "Herr Gustave Monnier, at your service."

"Is it possible?" said Ruggiero, with an air of great surprise. "This is a most extraordinary coincidence."

He turned to the under-stationmaster.

"I have come here to claim the body of one of my employees. His name also is Monnier."

"Indeed?" said the under-stationmaster.

"Henri Monnier," said the Mighty One.

There was a moment's silence.

"This, as you say, is most extraordinary. The body of Henri Monnier has already been claimed," and the under-stationmaster pointed to me.

Ruggiero looked at me with a convincing blend of bewilderment and suspicion.

"On what ground, may I ask?"

"This gentleman puts forward his claim as brother of the deceased," replied the under-stationmaster.

The eyebrows of the Mighty Magistro disappeared into the flowing hair about his tall forehead. He brooded upon me awhile, fingering his beard.

"So you are the brother of Henri Monnier?" he mused.

I bowed.

"It is strange that I should never have heard of you, Monsieur," he said. "It is very strange."

He looked aside at the under-stationmaster and at Herr Wetzlar, who were both beginning to take an ominous interest in these proceedings.

"I knew Henri Monnier extremely well—a devoted servant and friend. He was my confidential private secretary. But perhaps I had better present myself."



## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

He pulled from his waistcoat pocket a small visiting card, which he handed to the under-stationmaster. The under-stationmaster was clearly impressed.

"You were saying, Herr Direktor?" he prompted.

"As you perceive," continued Ruggiero, "I am a managing director of the Sigma Company. You are possibly aware that our firm is organised on the most modern lines. Though we employ over 5000 persons, our company, being second to none in its application of modern methods, vigilantly concerns itself with the welfare—almost individually—of its numerous staff. It is our practice to know something about every person, man or woman, within our gates. Henri Monnier, had he been the humblest member of our association, would have been known to me personally. But he was more than that. I must repeat that I knew him very well indeed; he spoke to me frequently and frankly of his family circumstances, and he lived at Rheinau, as I have always understood, with his widowed mother. He has repeatedly assured me that he had no other relatives in the world."

I looked at the Mighty Magistro with an assumption of cold assurance.

"I do not propose to discuss my domestic

affairs with this gentleman," I said. "There were private reasons why my brother preferred to maintain a certain reserve regarding his family relationships. I would ask you, sir,"—here I turned to the under-stationmaster,—“to abide by the arrangements you were good enough to approve, and would ask you to accept my thanks for your very kind assistance. Herr Wetzlar,” I concluded, addressing myself to that gentleman, “I am at your service.”

I made decisively towards the door.

“One moment,” said Ruggiero.

I neither stopped nor turned.

“One moment,” echoed the under-stationmaster.

I paused with my hand upon the latch.

“Reserve,” said the Mighty One, “I can understand and even respect. But if this gentleman is the brother of Henri Monnier, I can only say that I have been deliberately deceived by my late colleague. He was formally and officially entered in the records of the company as having only a widowed mother.”

I saw from the tail of my eye that the under-stationmaster had risen to his feet.

“Are you suggesting, Herr Direktor,” he said, “that this gentleman is not the brother of Henri Monnier?”

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"I can hardly go as far as that—more especially as you will naturally have satisfied yourself that his credentials are in order. You have doubtless examined his papers?"

The under-stationmaster flushed.

"It never occurred to me to doubt the gentleman's identity."

"Then you have no proof whatever that he is the brother of the deceased. I submit, with all respect, that as a conscientious official, it is your duty, if only as a matter of form, to examine this gentleman's passport."

The under-stationmaster turned to me.

"You have no objection, I presume?" he said.

"I have every objection," I replied angrily. "You have no reason whatever to doubt my word."

"Surely," said the Mighty Magistro gently, "this is not a question of confidence or doubt. It is a question of good order and correct procedure."

"It is as you say, Herr Direktor," agreed the under-stationmaster. "I ought, as a matter of form, to have asked this gentleman to show me his papers. But the circumstances were such . . ."



He paused. Ruggiero waved an emphatic arm.

"Of course . . . of course," he said. "Fortunately, however, the omission is easily repaired."

"I am not sure that I have my papers with me," I protested.

"Allow me," said the Mighty Magistro.

I was aware of a large, rapid and ubiquitous hand which in the twinkling of an eye swept over my person. I was taken too completely by surprise to resist and, before I knew what was happening, my passport lay open on the desk beside me.

The under-stationmaster picked it up.

"You will find," I said handsomely, "that my name is not Monnier at all."

"No," he continued, examining my passport. "I see that your name is Smooth and that you are of British nationality."

"I am nevertheless the brother of the deceased," I repeated firmly, "and I submit that there is no reason why I should be called upon to explain why I have changed my name."

"And your nationality too, apparently," said the under-stationmaster.

"Doubtless the gentleman has excellent reasons," murmured Ruggiero.

"Excellent reasons," I repeated firmly.

"Into which he does not wish us to inquire," continued Ruggiero smoothly.

Then, abandoning his lighter manner, he took a pace forward and thrust forth his beard.

"Sir," he said sternly, addressing the understationmaster, "this has gone on long enough. You will already have begun to suspect that this gentleman is an impostor and, as a director of the firm of which the late Henri Monnier was a servant, I formally ask that his body should be handed over to the company of which I am the representative. I will prove to your satisfaction my own identity and my genuine relationship with the deceased."

"Why should the Sigma Cigarette Company," I asked, "be so anxious to secure the body of one of its employees?"

Ruggiero turned upon me swiftly.

"The Sigma Cigarette Company," he declaimed, "regards itself as responsible for the welfare of its employees, alive or dead. Do you imagine, sir, that the humblest member of our fraternity would be allowed to die in circumstances of such appalling tragedy without our firm doing all that lay in its power to lighten the sorrow of those who are left behind? M. Monnier lived at Rheinau, at the gates of our establishment. He has met his death travelling on the company's

business. It is my duty to take him back to Rheinau, where he will be buried among his own people. Further, it is my duty to protect him from any international body-snatcher who may seek, for reasons of his own, to appropriate his remains."

He turned to the under-stationmaster.

"Have you a telephone?" he concluded suddenly.

The man pointed in silence to an instrument standing on the table.

"You will permit me to put through a trunk call, perhaps?" asked the Mighty Magistro.

"Certainly, Herr Direktor."

Ruggiero took down the receiver and asked for a number.

"I am going to telephone to the Sigma Works. I shall ask our registry to give you full particulars of Henri Monnier and you shall take the message yourself. I presume you will accept what they say?"

"Certainly."

"I shall prove to your satisfaction that he has been living in Rheinau with his widowed mother, and I take it that you will have no objection if I avail myself of the services of Herr Wetzlar? I need hardly say that my own credentials are at your disposal."



## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

He pulled out a passport which he handed to the under-stationmaster, who examined it carefully.

"This seems to be in order," he replied.

"Of course it is in order," said Ruggiero shortly.

At that instant the telephone bell rang. The under-stationmaster picked up the receiver and handed it without a word to Ruggiero.

"Is that the Sigma Works? . . . Thank you. . . . This is Herr Valmont speaking. Give me the Registry please. . . . Is that the Registry? . . . Thank you. . . . Will you please look up the dossier of Henri Monnier?"

There was a short pause. Then without a word he handed the receiver to the under-stationmaster.

The under-stationmaster took the receiver and wrote down the particulars, repeating them aloud as he did so.

"Monnier, Henri . . . Born September 4th, 1889. Parents, Adèle and Jean Monnier, of Brussels. Sole surviving relative, Adèle Monnier, Mother."

The under-stationmaster looked at me over the top of the instrument.

"Thank you," he concluded.

"One moment," said the Mighty Magistro.

"I want to speak to the factory myself."

*A.C. No 2184360*

He took the receiver, and meanwhile the under-stationmaster again scrutinised my passport—this time with an air of the deepest suspicion. As I watched him uneasily, wondering what on earth I was going to do next, I heard Ruggiero asking for a certain Monsieur Du Bertrand. Listening with half an ear I inferred that he was telling someone in authority at the Sigma factory of what had occurred. In particular he mentioned Monnier and said that he was about to arrange for the removal of the body to Rheinau.

The under-stationmaster handed me back my passport.

“I cannot in the circumstances,” he said severely, “deliver to you the body of M. Monnier. You can, of course, have recourse to the police, who will require you to establish your identity. Otherwise I shall make the necessary arrangements here and now with Herr Valmont.”

The Mighty Magistro laid down the telephone.

“I do not think that Herr Smooth will wish to dispute my claim,” he said, “and I shall be grateful if the arrangements to which you refer could be made without delay.”

The under-stationmaster looked from one to the other of us in a kind of resentful bewilderment.

“Do you,” he asked, addressing Ruggiero, “wish to bring an official complaint against this gentleman?”

Ruggiero looked me full in the face. I saw perhaps—or was it my imagination?—the flicker of a smile about the corners of his mouth.

“The authorities,” he said, “have quite enough to do at this moment. I am at a loss to understand the motives of the strange impersonation of Mr. Smooth. Possibly it is a case for medical attention. The gentleman has received a shock. An infirmary perhaps . . .”

Herr Wetzlar stepped forward suddenly.

“The pocket-book,” he said.

“Ah!” exclaimed the under-stationmaster.

I inferred from his tone that a motive had been suggested. With a fine gesture I produced the pocket-book of Henri Monnier, flung it on the table and made to withdraw.

“Wait,” said the under-stationmaster.

Ruggiero had turned his back on me as not worth further powder and shot and was speaking to Herr Wetzlar.

“You were, I believe, making certain arrangements,” he said, “previous to my arrival.”

Herr Wetzlar bowed.

“I had undertaken on behalf of this person”—



I had gone down in the world—"to convey the body of M. Monnier to Munich. I was to make immediate arrangements for its embalming this afternoon, so that it might leave for Munich this evening on the 7.53."

The Mighty Magistro nodded.

"Munich!" he said, "that is not now the direction in which M. Monnier should travel. He will not therefore take the 7.53."

Here the under-stationmaster interposed.

"You doubtless wish," he said, "that the body should be sent to Strassburg, Herr Valmont. From there the distance to Rheinau is not great."

"That," answered Ruggiero, "is my intention."

"Then you must travel by the 7.53 after all," continued the under-stationmaster. "This terrible accident has blocked the line and I have already had instructions to divert all traffic."

He approached a map on the wall and pointed with his pencil.

"Here," he said, "is Offenburg. The direct line through Hausach and Villingen to the Danube has, as you see, been cut and it will be at least a day before it is open again."

"Then, presumably trains for Munich and

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

Eastern Bavaria will be sent through Freiburg," Ruggiero observed.

The under-stationmaster shook his head.

"No. That other line is also blocked; the recent disaster at Ettenheim not having yet been repaired. All traffic must now go by Hausach. Trains will be sent through Appenweier to Strassburg and then, on French territory, via Colmar and Mülhausen to Bâle. It is a long way round."

"In that case," said Ruggiero, with a keen glance at the map, "the 7.53 will not pass through Offenburg at all, for the line to Appenweier, as it seems to me, is some ten kilometres to the north."

The under-stationmaster nodded.

"True," he answered, "but it will be necessary for the train to call at Offenburg, since it carries passengers for that station. We cannot detrain them ten kilometres short of the town. The train will therefore run into Offenburg and out again to Appenweier.

"It's all very complicated," he concluded, "but those are my instructions."

"Quick work," commented the Mighty Magistro.

"The German railways are most efficient," said the little man proudly. "We cannot be

held responsible for these dreadful accidents. They are the work of criminals. They will be discovered and these poor victims will be avenged."

The man's eyes were gleaming behind his spectacles.

"So be it," said the Mighty Magistro solemnly. "The forces of law and order will, I am sure, prevail. The eagle shall slay the serpent."

He turned to Herr Wetzlar.

"I will ask you," he said, "to carry out your arrangements unaltered. The fee will be at my charge."

With a smile again lurking at the corner of his mouth, he picked up the pocket-book of Henri Monnier from the table.

"I will ring up my assistant," said Herr Wetzlar, "and tell him to make all ready for the embalming."

"There will be no objection, I trust, to my being present at that operation," interposed Ruggiero. "I am greatly interested in the process."

"No objection whatever," Herr Wetzlar replied.

"The art of embalming," said the Mighty Magistro, gazing round the room as though it held an audience, "is of very great antiquity.



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It was practised, if I am right, as early as the first dynasty of Egypt and the custom reached its height in the twenty-first dynasty. The Egyptians entertained the belief, not wholly abandoned even in these modern days, that the physical identity of the dead might be perpetuated. Other races have felt a similar desire to stay and even to defeat the corruption of the body. The original natives of the Canary Islands were wont to embalm their dead in a manner resembling that of the Egyptians. In Indonesia, Australia, Melanesia and Polynesia the custom still prevails, whereas I need scarcely mention the remarkable mummies of the Inca civilisation of South America. Many ancient writers have described, I fear not always with complete accuracy, the processes of embalmment. Herodotus mentions it. So does Diodorus Siculus. Plato makes more than one reference to the matter, while Porphyry, Lucian, Strabo and even Cicero include a reference to it in their speeches and writings."

He paused.

"I might venture to point out," began Herr Wetzlar.

But the Mighty Magistro was not to be deflected.

"Statius informs us that the body of Alexander

was embalmed with honey. Passing to more modern times, Henry the First of England was in 1135 laid to rest after the withdrawal of his organs and the substitution for them of frankincense, myrrh and other aromatic herbs. It was, I believe, Ruysch of Amsterdam who, between the years 1680 and 1717, first devised a method for the preservation of bodies which should render unnecessary their actual dissection or mutilation.

"It will give me much pleasure to witness your performance, Herr Wetzlar," he concluded suddenly.

I did not stay to hear more. The three men in the room had ceased to regard me. I slipped to the door.

As I opened it and walked along the platform I heard the voice of the Mighty Magistro uplifted behind me.

"No," he was saying. "I am satisfied that the poor Englishman is harmless."

THE platform was no longer crowded with officials. All the injured had been removed and the bulk of the dead. Once more I had cause to admire German efficiency and despatch.

But I had even more cause to admire the efficiency and despatch of Ruggiero. Here was an adversary worthy of good steel. Would mine be proof and adequate? I had it by training, by my position as an agent to the British Crown and the fact that I was part of a widespread and highly efficient organisation. But, even with these advantages, could I hope to be a match for my exuberant and resourceful enemy? I tried to remember all that I had read or heard of Ruggiero—his early life as a travelling conjurer; his remarkable performances as the human encyclopædia, prepared to answer any reasonable question out of hand; his career as an international secret agent, which had ended untimely owing to his invariable habit of trying to serve two masters; and finally, his recent sensational encounter with Granby over the Bramber Bequest. I found nothing in all this that was at all reassuring. Here was a clever,



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dangerous and quite unscrupulous opponent, in whose armour I could find no serviceable chink.

Emerging into the station square, I looked at my watch. It was just after five o'clock in the evening. My escape from the train, my discovery of X.42, my efforts to get possession of his body and my final discomfiture—all that had taken place in a little less than two hours.

What was I to do? The situation called for brains rather than brawn. I felt acutely the inadequacy of my six feet of senseless muscle and my rather wooden habit—it was marked up to me as an asset at headquarters—of sticking blindly to the matter in hand.

*I am satisfied that the poor Englishman is harmless.*  
It rankled.

The station square was of the ordinary type met with in small German towns. It was perhaps a hundred yards across, with, at the far end, a street with shops, from which the town straggled away and presently climbed a small wooded hill. There were plane trees shading the square and at one corner was a *Bierhalle* or *Weinhaus*. Outside the station stood three dilapidated taxis and a small private car.

I crossed the square. Embalmmment—so ran my thoughts—was effected nowadays by the

injection of drugs into the vascular system. Ruggiero would not therefore obtain the message immediately. He would take the body to Rheinau. Therefore I too must go to Rheinau. The poor Englishman was harmless, but on the 7.53 we should meet again.

I found myself opposite the *Bierhalle*. In front of it was a neat terrace with trees in tubs, and the three owners of the three dilapidated taxis were seated there drinking and discussing the accident. I sat down and ordered beer. Though I tried to concentrate on my problem, I found myself hearing in snatches the conversation of the taximen. One of them, it seemed, with drink taken, was a strong National Socialist.

"How it happened?" he was saying. "I can tell you that: the down train was switched on to the up line. The pointsman was a Communist. This is the revolution . . . over a hundred casualties . . . there will be more to-morrow."

"There goes Herr Wetzlar in his little black Opel," said another. "Plenty of work for him, and he isn't losing much time about it either."

I recognised the undertaker as he came from the station and got into the private car which I had noticed as waiting just outside.

Ruggiero would presumably soon be wishing



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to follow Herr Wetzlar to his mortuary office. For that purpose—so ran my thoughts—he would need a taxi.

“Communists,” repeated the first driver, as all three watched the Opel disappear into the street.

“The authorities have no doubt that the accidents are organised,” I interposed.

All three turned simultaneously in my direction.

“I was in the train from Munich,” I said, “and I know what the officials at the station think.”

“Communists,” repeated the Nazi driver.

We fell to a prolonged discussion of the accident, in course of which I ordered beer in plenty for the table. A quarter of an hour elapsed, but there was no sign of Ruggiero on the station steps. Meanwhile, I kept the Nazi driver well supplied with drink and cast about for an opportunity to be rid of him. I had ascertained by cautious inquiry that he was the first man on the rank and would therefore be the first to be called up for a fare. He laid his cap and driving coat on a seat at a little distance from the table. My own light fawn overcoat and felt hat were on another chair. Making the excuse that I wanted to get a packet of cigarettes from my overcoat, I



rose, went across to it, removed the cigarettes and then contrived to throw my things over the same chair as those on which those of the driver were already reposing.

I returned to the table.

Should I try bribery? That was hardly possible with three of them present.

My eyes went continually to the railway station. Suddenly I heard a bell shrill somewhere inside the house and, at the same instant, as though taking his cue, Ruggiero appeared on the station steps and stood there for a moment, a striking figure with his black curling beard and proud carriage of the head and shoulders.

My time had come. I turned quickly to the Nazi driver.

"Isn't that the telephone?" I asked.

"That will be from the station," said the man, rising to his feet. "I'd better see who it is."

All had their backs to the station and they had none of them seen Ruggiero. The taximan was already disappearing into the house. I rose to my feet and deliberately caught my foot in one of the iron legs of the table round which we had been sitting. It tilted the beer-pots, started them sliding and deposited their contents into the laps of the other two men. At the same moment I

flung all my small change down on the ground—amounting to about seven marks.

“Take it out of that,” I shouted and, as the two men vanished beneath the table, in pursuit of the rolling coins, I made with all speed towards my coat and hat. But I picked up instead the accoutrements of the taximan, jamming the cap on my head, struggling into the coat and pulling the strap about my waist. I then ran hard towards the first taxi.

All this was sheer desperation, but the luck was with me and I reached the taxi just as Ruggiero came down the steps. A large cigar, fragrant and expensive, protruded from the corner of his mouth.

“Taxi, sir?” I said, touching my cap with a broad gesture that half concealed my face.

“Drive me to Herr Wetzlar’s mortuary chamber,” he said and, fumbling in his pocket, he produced a card. “Willingstrasse 14,” he added.

“I know it well,” I responded hurriedly in guttural German and jumped to the wheel.

The engine was warm and started at the first touch. I even remembered to bend back and shut the door on the Mighty One. Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of the two taximen still groping for largesse upon the floor of the

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terrace, while, as I swept past the *Bierhalle*, the door was flung open and the third taximan appeared in the opening.

I had never been to Offenburg and did not know my way about. We shot down the main street and across a river. Then we started to climb a hill. I was looking rapidly to right and left. We were approaching a road shaded with trees that climbed yet another hill to the right. I turned resolutely into this road which, I was pleased to observe, led out of the town. I glanced at my watch. It was now nearly six o'clock.

There came a tap on the window behind me and a voice down the speaking tube.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To Herr Wetzlar's mortuary chapel," I answered. "It is rather a long way out."

"Willingstrasse 14," repeated Ruggiero.

"The same," I responded.

The Mighty Magistro appeared to be satisfied. I drove rapidly for a mile or so through a beautiful wooded road dark with pines, firs and other trees. How far would he allow himself to be taken? It must sooner or later come to an issue between us and he was a large and presumably a powerful man.

It was then that I noticed a road with a signpost



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forking away to the right. I glanced at the post and read : ZUM FRIEDHOF—to the cemetery. We turned a corner and it lay before us. It was a large cemetery and seemed to stretch for miles. I drove along the boundary wall, wondering how much longer mutual explanations could be deferred.

The boundary wall ended in a pair of wrought-iron gates. In front of them were the usual yards and offices of the stone-masons, with mortuary statues lying to right and left.

I stopped the taxi, swung open the door and pointed with my left hand.

“Through there, Mein Herr,” I said.

The Mighty Magistro alighted impressively.

“Where?” he demanded.

I pointed again.

“Behind the statues. The office will be there.”

He hesitated, and I could feel him looking keenly at my averted face.

“Wait for me,” he said at last.

I touched my cap and sat back.

Looking sidelong after him I saw him pass beneath the spreading wings of a ponderous stone angel towards the open door of a wooden hut or office. Now was the moment. I made to let in the clutch and drive off, leaving him marooned.

It was painfully clear, however, that Ruggiero, if I left him at large, would easily be able to get back to Oldenburg in time to see Herr Wetzlar and catch the 7.53 as he had intended. That, at all costs, I was determined to prevent, even though it meant a trial of strength between us.

I therefore descended from the taxi and moved silently after him towards the office door.

Inside the office I heard voices. Ruggiero was talking to someone and, looking round the edge of the door, I saw him at the far end of a long room. He was asking questions of a workman and the answers were apparently far from satisfactory.

I looked hastily at the door—of stout timber but with only a frail latch, a bolt and a lock without a key. Then my eye went aside to a mighty slab of granite propped against the wall of the house. I softly closed, latched and bolted the door. There was an instant exclamation from inside and a hurry of steps. The door was roughly shaken but the bolt held. Meanwhile, with the sweat starting from my forehead, I tugged at the granite slab. Only by putting forth all my strength could I shift it askew till, with a final effort, I tipped it right across the

fairway and allowed it to fall with its full weight upon the panels of the door.

I looked up at the single window. It was small and Ruggiero was a big man. There was practically no exit for him there and, walking swiftly round the house, I satisfied myself that no other means of egress existed.

I came back to the door, which was now being assaulted violently from within. Help from outside might be quickly forthcoming and the granite slab could be easily removed. My eye then fell upon the ponderous angel with the spreading wings. It stood conveniently close for my purpose. I went to the further side and put my shoulder to its ample bosom. It tottered and I swung it rhythmically backwards and forwards till an increasing momentum carried it off its feet and caused it to fall with a heavy thud right across the threshold of the hut.

I surveyed my impious work with satisfaction. Nothing short of a small crane or a couple of strong horses would move that angel from the door.

I then ran swiftly to the taxi, glancing at my watch as I went. It was now half-past six and I drove straight back to the station.

My next problem was to deal with the taximen, who, I feared, might by now have raised the town



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against me. I remembered that the first driver, whose cab I had stolen, was a Nazi. I knew something of the Nazi organisation and decided to act accordingly.

Sure enough the man was awaiting me. I sprang from the taxi and went straight towards him.

"Orders of the captain: 4th company, 7th division," I barked, hoping that my German accent would be good enough to mislead these simple fellows. "Have you no discipline here in Offenburg?"

The man looked at me doubtfully.

"You must be compensated, of course," I continued sharply, handing as I did so a fifty-mark note.

His face cleared. The scowl faded. He made shift to draw himself to attention and to give me the Nazi salute.

I chided him for doing so, saying that I did not want attention drawn to my presence and then inquired the whereabouts of Herr Wetzlar's mortuary parlour.

I was directed to a little street, the real Willingstrasse, in fact, and I walked briskly off in that direction, the drivers watching my departure in awed astonishment.

Dusk was now approaching as I walked past

the neat shops and even neater citizens of Offenburg. I was looking the while for suitable cover, whence I could watch the undertaker's parlour. For I must see whether Ruggiero returned and I must know when the body of X.42 departed.

Herr Wetzlar's shop was of sombre magnificence. Behind its plate glass window sable hangings dripped from pedestals, upon which chased urns were displayed. A collection of mortuary cards, deeply edged with black and of all shapes, sizes and letterings, was fixed to a board propped in front. Behind were discreet notices urging the respective merits of oak, elm or pine. Gables above the shop with curtained windows seemed to indicate that this was also the habitation of Herr Wetzlar.

I did not pause to gaze too closely at the shop, but passed straight on and sought to discover whether there was an entrance other than that giving on to the street. I soon found that this was not the case, for the house formed one of a compact block. I had therefore but one door to watch. I strolled back and, not twenty yards away on the other side of the street, found the inevitable *Weinstube*. I entered, ordered a glass of the local Rhenish, poured out for me by a stout lass from a tall carafe, and sat by the window sipping the wine and keeping a quiet look-out.



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There I remained for the better part of an hour, breathing more freely as the minutes passed.

Towards half-past seven o'clock I began to face a very necessary decision. Presumably the body of X.42 was waiting in the house opposite, for it could hardly have been brought to the shop, embalmed and removed to the station during my short excursion with Ruggiero. If, however, it did not emerge pretty soon I should have to go to the station in order to make sure that it was or was not—as the case might be—being put on the 7.53 train. It was just possible that Ruggiero had in some way modified his instructions to Herr Wetzlar.

Soon, however, all my doubts were set at rest. The clocks in the town were chiming the half-hour as a motor hearse came round the corner into the street. The chauffeur was in sable livery. Even his chin was in mourning, for he had not shaved for at least two days. The hearse drew up in front of the shop, and it had scarcely come to a standstill before Herr Wetzlar himself appeared in the doorway, superintending the movements of two men in shirt-sleeves who carried a coffin immediately behind him. The coffin was of plain, unpolished elm.

I need wait no longer. On the contrary I must get ready to follow quickly to the station.



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My reckoning was paid and I slipped into the street.

It was now dark and the figures about the hearse, thrusting the coffin on board, as I stood in the quiet street with the first faint stars above my head, seemed the creatures of a morbid fancy. I should wake in a moment from this horrid rhapsody to find myself walking down the broad streets of Munich, with Hilda waiting for me perhaps outside the Maximilianeum. But, alas! these were no night thoughts but stark reality. The dark figures vanished with an echo of steps. Herr Wetzlar himself had taken the seat beside the driver and the hearse was heading for the station.

I followed on foot, taking good care that Herr Wetzlar should not catch sight of me from the hearse. I had as yet no definite plan, except that I must travel by the 7.53. The hearse reached the station at twenty minutes to eight. I slipped in close behind it and bought a second-class ticket to Strassburg which admitted me at once to the platform. The train was already waiting. It was crowded and there were many people walking up and down. I caught a glimpse of my friend the under-stationmaster, following in the wake of a magnificently braided personage whom I took to be his Chief. These I avoided and edged my

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way quietly towards the end of the train. There, sure enough, was a plain dark van which in the usual course of events would carry luggage. Beside the door stood Herr Wetzlar himself and, even as I arrived, the lean coffin of elm was thrust within.

I slipped behind a newspaper kiosk and watched. Herr Wetzlar stood talking to someone inside the van whom I could not see; but, at last, to my infinite relief he stood back, made a sign of farewell and walked away up the platform. There was a sombre expression of content upon his face, from which I inferred that his transaction with Ruggiero had been of much profit to himself.

I emerged from behind the kiosk and made, without more ado, for the van. In my hand I grasped a thousand-mark note. There was no time for anything but the crudest methods, for my watch showed me that the train was due to start in three minutes.

I approached the van and looked inside. It contained two coffins—one draped with a plain black cloth and the other, which I recognised, of unpolished elm. A little man was seated on a rough bench that ran round the inside of the van. He was dressed in a grey suit, rather the worse for wear. His face was round and red, his nose of a

deeper hue. His grey hair hung in wisps over his forehead.

"*Herr Leichnambegleiter*," I said quickly.

The little man nodded sharply and looked at me with swift suspicion.

"Listen," I said; "the coffin you have just received—it has upon it the name of Henri Monnier."

"Well?" he grunted.

"He was my brother. I must travel with him. I have no time to speak here. Let me aboard. I will hide myself in the van."

The corpse-conductor gazed at me in bewilderment.

I thrust the thousand-mark note into his hand.

"For your trouble," I said.

Somewhere I heard the clang of a bell. The corpse-conductor reached down to me a long hand.

"In with you," he said, "and lie down."

I scrambled into the van and crawled behind the coffins.

The little corpse-conductor pulled to the sliding door and we were then in darkness.

A moment later, with a jerk, the train started on its way.



“Must keep the door shut,” said the *Leichnambeleiter*.

There was a quality not to be mistaken in his utterance and in the air about him. I was carrying a flask of brandy, but it looked as though it would not be needed.

He was silent a moment. The smell of stale wine mingled in the darkness with the smell of new varnish from the coffins.

“Oughtn’t to be here,” said the *Leichnambegleiter*. “Reg’lations . . . travel alone.”

There followed the scrape of a match and a sudden flare revealed the bibulous face and shaking hand of the old man, who, after two or three attempts, succeeded in lighting a single candle. Its feeble flame illumined the dark walls of the van and the two silent coffins lying side by side. Remote were “the trees, the wind, the golden day,” and only the rocking of the train and the steady hum of wheels beneath our feet broke the illusion that I was no longer in a world of men.

The *Leichnambegleiter* sat down heavily beside one of the coffins, and held out a slim bottle of Rhenish in speechless invitation.

"No, thank you," I said. "Try some of this."

I produced my flask and handed it to him. He unscrewed the cap and took a long pull.

"French brandy," he said with appreciation. "Not German brandy . . . French brandy . . . very good brandy."

He drank again and stared hazily in front of him.

"The things I have seen," he continued. "You'd not believe. . . . Thirty years . . . all over Germany with stiffs . . . thirty years. . . . From Königsberg to Bâle . . . from Kiel to Munich."

"Rather monotonous," I ventured.

"It's a responsibility," said the corpse-conductor, "a great responsibility."

The train slowed down and presently came to a full-stop.

"Strassburg already?" I asked in a panic, for I had not yet begun to do that which must be done.

He shook his head.

"Not Strassburg," he said. "Strassburg is French . . . lost . . . to the Fatherland . . . too old to fight . . . but the day will come."

His head was sunk between his shoulders and I could hardly catch his drunken words. But it

did not suit me that he should fall asleep beside the coffins. I had work to do—vital work.

“You will be more comfortable lying over there,” I said, pointing to a mattress and blanket of doubtful cleanliness in the far corner of the coach, where presumably he was accustomed to take his rest during the long night journeys. I put an arm under his shoulder and his head went back with a jerk.

“Not asleep,” he protested. “Reg’lations . . . mustn’t sleep on duty . . . mustn’t talk to strangers . . . you must go away now . . . reg’lations.”

His head fell forward and, lifting him by the waist, I led him gently to the pallet.

“Strassburg very soon now,” he said. “Strassburg in France . . . frontier first . . . passports . . . must go away now.”

I laid him on the pallet and threw the blanket over him as the train started again with a jolt. I went to the sliding door and pushed it a little way open.

“Reg’lations,” came a voice from the corner behind me.

“All right,” I answered. “I’m just seeing where we are.”

It became clear that we were approaching Appenweier. The lights of the little town



glimmered somewhere to my right. There we should be switched away to Kehl, the railway frontier station separated from Strassburg by the Rhine.

I slid the door back into its place again. The candle flickered. The man on the pallet, to my annoyance, was not yet asleep. On the contrary, he was biting industriously at a liver sausage. Either he must go to sleep or be put to sleep.

I again produced the brandy flask.

"Brandy," said the corpse-conductor, "French brandy . . . better than German brandy."

"Yes," I repeated, "French brandy."

"I like French brandy," said the corpse-conductor, putting his mouth to the flask. "Do you like French brandy?"

"Yes," I said.

"Better than German brandy," said the corpse-conductor.

The spirit gurgled in his throat. He handed the flask back to me and then sank down on his mattress. The sausage slipped from his fingers and rolled towards me. He giggled slightly and then, to my great relief, rolled over on his side, putting his face to the wall.

I turned back to the coffins, approaching the one with the black cloth. I drew back the cloth distastefully from the brass plate screwed in place

upon the lid of it and started back surprised into a cold horror which for the moment arrested the course of reason. For upon the plate, staring up at me in the dim light, was the inscription: "HILDA VON ESSELING." I could grasp nothing but the freezing contrast—Hilda, screwed down under the brass plate, and Hilda as a few hours before I had seen her in Munich, laughing with Granby and myself in the Hofbrauhaus. Then I laughed—not a pleasant laugh. For my brain had begun to move again and I knew that this could not be Hilda herself. This was Aunt Hilda going to her rest with the others of her name and line.

So, still trembling from the shock I had received, I bent to my work.

Half an hour later, sitting beside the old man in the corner of the van, I became aware that the train was stopping again. Station lamps flashed past the crack in the door, throwing swift and wheeling shadows into the van. A porter went crying down the platform. My companion sat up abruptly.

"Kehl," he muttered. "Must go away now. . . . French frontier over the bridge . . . passports . . . questions."

Ruggiero's friends would presumably come to take delivery of the coffin. I had intended to



slip from the van, allowing the corpse-conductor to make delivery while I watched his proceedings from a compartment near at hand. It was now too late, however. Through the slit in the door figures could be seen, passing down the platform outside. I could not risk being caught leaving the van where I had no right to be. The safer course—though it might seem the more dangerous—was to remain in the van and myself deliver the coffin at Strassburg, trusting that my enforced impersonation of the *Leichnambegleiter* would not be detected.

The train started again. The corpse-conductor had fallen abruptly silent and I bent to see how it fared with him. He was breathing heavily, having dropped into a stupor from which he seemed unlikely to recover for hours. I took from his pocket all the papers which he carried, examining them by the light of the candle and identifying those which I should require. I then covered him completely with the blanket and extinguished the candle. Any light that entered from the door would leave the corner where he lay in shadow.

The train rumbled on through the night, till finally it clanked over a big iron bridge, through the lattice-work of which I could see a faint gleam of water. This, I knew, was the Rhine and



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beyond it was Strassburg. In five minutes we had arrived.

I slid open the door. If the coast was clear I still intended to slip from the van, leaving behind the papers of the *Leichnambegleiter*. I saw at once, however, that it would not be possible to escape unnoticed. As the train came to a standstill an official who was awaiting it came towards me, accompanied by a man in a fawn coat and by a group of porters.

"The *Herr Leichnambegleiter*?" asked the official.

I nodded and handed him the papers which I had identified as the certificate or waybill covering the transport of X.42 from Oldenburg to Rheinau. The papers were taken from me, examined and stamped.

"All seems to be in order," said the official.

He signed to two of the porters, who came forward and entered the van.

"On the right," I said curtly, indicating the coffin which I had to deliver.

There came a sound of heavy breathing, and the two porters emerged carrying the coffin between them.

I began to feel happy again. In another moment I should be left in peace. Already the coffin was being placed upon a small trolley beside

the van. I stood with my back to the door trying to look like a man of the fewest possible words.

Then, suddenly, there came a sound from behind me—a shuffling of feet and a voice that I knew.

“French brandy,” it said, “better than German brandy.”

Framed in the doorway of the van appeared the dishevelled figure of the corpse-conductor. For a moment he stood swaying and blinking, then suddenly toppled forward and fell with a crash to the platform.

The officials surged forward. I drew a deep breath.

The corpse-conductor, after this last heroic flutter of his faculties, was now definitely out of action, and I made ready to give what explanation I could of how he came to be in that condition, how I came to be travelling with him; and why I had attempted to perform his uncheerful duties. My explanation had the merits of simplicity. The man was my friend; I had noticed at Oldenburg that, alas! he was drunk; I had feared that he might be exposed to scandal and reproach. I had, therefore, decided to accompany him so that his office might be punctually and decently performed. I had been guilty of a serious



misdemeanour, and I had failed to shield my friend from the consequences of his folly; I could only throw myself on the compassion and generosity of the authorities. Such was the story which I poured forth to the scandalised officials, keeping a wary eye, as I did so, upon the man in the fawn coat. Who was he? A servant of Ruggiero, no doubt, and warned by telephone against me. Would he denounce me as an impenitent body-snatcher, or allow my story to go unchallenged?

He stood by impassively. This, he seemed to imply, was none of his business. The papers were in order. The sad consignment had been delivered. The regulations had apparently been broken and it was, indeed, a scandal that an individual, whose calling demanded a high standard of reliability and decorum, should have fallen to the low estate of my disreputable friend. That, however, was a matter for the company.

The officials were fussy, but not unkind. The *Leichnambegleiter* was carried to a waiting-room and laid upon one of the benches; a sober and respectable substitute was found to accompany the second coffin to Munich; while I myself was detained and required to sign a formal statement of my companion's delinquencies. The ruling of the stationmaster, to whom appeal was made,



was to the effect that the *Leichnambegleiter* had been guilty of a breach of the regulations and would be required to pay the penalty; but that I, being a member of the public and under no specific obligation, though I might be charged with assisting a servant of the company to evade its by-laws, was not seriously to blame. My own passport was in order; my motives were excellent. The company would probably, for the avoidance of scandal, forbear to prosecute. I had made a full and frank statement and I might hope that no more would be heard of the matter.

In effect I was at last dismissed with a caution and, after a mild but prolonged application of the third degree, was free, towards midnight, to leave the station and consider what my next move should be. The train to Munich was already far away and the coffin which I had delivered over to the man in the fawn coat had by now presumably reached the factory at Rheinau.

I had taken neither rest nor refreshment for many hours and, on emerging into the station square, not knowing the town, I looked uncertainly about me. I was at once accosted by the inevitable loafer, who as inevitably knew of an excellent house, open to receive visitors at any hour, at less than five minutes' walk from the station. I refused his offer to guide me and, to

free myself from his pestering—for he continued to pursue me whining of bathrooms and running hot water—I turned at random up a side street, opening from a wider thoroughfare. This action was my undoing. The loafer still followed me down the street, passing under a lamp. I turned on him sharply, for I disliked having him continually behind. As I did so a dark shadow fell over my shoulder from an adjacent doorway; at the same time the little man whom I was now facing flung himself at my knees. In an instant we were struggling on the ground, but not for long, for, as I rolled over on my back, the shadow from the side took substance—a powerful man with a limp object dangling from his hand which he swung swiftly round and brought down heavily upon my head.

I recovered to find myself lying in a heap on the bottom of a closed car. I sat up with a start to realise that something cold and hard was being pressed into the nape of my neck.

“Keep quiet,” came a voice from above. “This thing will go off if we have any trouble with you.

“Get on the seat beside me,” continued the voice.

We drove for the best part of an hour. I tried to console myself by the reflection that my



captors would soon find that there was little or nothing to be had out of me, for I myself knew nothing. But that on further consideration was a poor thought. For how was I to convince them of my ignorance? There were tales current in the Service which were far from reassuring—Birdlett, whose body had been found unpleasantly mangled in a Dusseldorf alley; Dennison, now in a lunatic asylum as a result of what had happened to him in Leningrad; Braz, whom I had met in Paris with a scarred face and three fingers of the left hand missing. I realised that it would be well for me not to give way to fancies.

Presently the car turned to the right. We had, I perceived, passed through some gates, illumined by a couple of arc lamps, and were approaching a long building with many windows, designed on modern lines. At intervals along its front metal brackets supporting globes of electric light jutted from the white walls. I saw all this rather vaguely as the car ran past. Then we turned sharp to the left and the car pulled up with a jerk.

"Get out," said the man, shifting his pistol to the small of my back.

I found myself opposite a small door. A man in overalls standing beside it slid the door open and, still in close contact with the unpleasantly laconic gentleman, I entered what appeared to be



some kind of basement. The walls were of concrete and unadorned. Pipes ran along the ceiling. Covering the floor-space were large quantities of boxes, neatly piled and with labels upon them in three languages.

The man with the pistol pushed me forward and we walked perhaps fifty yards.

"Left turn," he barked.

I did as he bade me and perceived a long truckle-bed, without sheets but provided with blankets and a canvas pillow.

"You will stay here for the night," said the man.

Already he was moving away from me and, before I could say a word, he had disappeared round the corner and I was left alone.

I looked unhappily about me. The boxes, I found, contained cigarettes, tobacco and cigars packed ready for despatch, all bearing the superscription and trade-mark of the Sigma Company. I had been brought to headquarters and should presumably soon be meeting Ruggiero.

I had not carried my investigations very far when I perceived a man in overalls approaching me. He carried in his hand a tray on which I rejoiced to see a bottle of beer.

"For me?" I asked in French.

He nodded without speaking.

I followed him back to the truckle-bed, on which he placed the tray. There were also a plate of cold meat upon it, potatoes, a salad and some bread and cheese.

"Where am I?" I asked.

The fellow regarded me for a moment and then put his hand to his throat, in which I perceived, with a slight feeling of horror, that a tube had been inserted.

"The Sigma Cigarette Factory," he said with a curious whistling intonation.

"In Rheinau?" I suggested.

"Rheinau," he said and moved off.

"One moment," I began.

He turned.

"I have nothing to tell you," he said. "I am to make you comfortable. You will find a packet of our cigarettes on the tray."

And, without another word, he turned and left me.

I contrived to make a very tolerable meal. Afterwards I lit one of the cigarettes, which I found to be very good, and started again upon my explorations. I soon found that my chances of getting away were small. The basement stretched for a long way, the whole length of the factory, in fact, and everywhere I found the same orderly piles of boxes, crates and cardboard



receptacles. There were but few windows and they were strongly barred. The light, dim and uncertain, came from a few electric bulbs set here and there in the ceiling. I encountered in my perambulations two night-watchmen. Both were armed and neither was communicative. Finally, I returned to the bed provided by the management. I had begun, curiously enough, to feel oddly content and not at all dismayed.

I lay back on the pallet. The cigarettes were really excellent. I took another. What should I say to anyone I might meet the following morning? I found myself looking forward to the coming interview as something which was likely to be amusing and from which I should almost certainly emerge with credit. Also I was feeling sleepy—somnolent and at peace.

Soon, indeed, I fell into deep and satisfying slumber, shot with dreams. Hilda appeared in them—a gracious figure, immeasurably desirable but unsubstantial and aloof. I rode with her in the morning over crisp turf, or I walked with her beside a flowing river, beneath spreading trees.

I awoke to find a dim morning light filtering through the small high windows of the basement. For some time I lay wondering where I was. The comfort and elation of my last waking moments had passed. There were a disagreeable tightness



about my forehead and a dry taste in my mouth. I felt ill at ease, depressed and very conscious of my unrefreshed condition. In the cold light of the morning, sitting in that shadowy basement in my small-clothes and unshaven, a deep depression settled on me like a heavy cloud.

I was roused, a little later, by the surly man with the tube in his throat. He came to the side of my bed.

"You are to have a bath," he said. "It is, I understand, an English habit."

I walked through the basement, past several doors, down a white-tiled passage and so, presently, into a large room, also tiled. Spray baths ran all round it at a fixed distance from the walls and hooks hung upon light chains from the ceiling. I undressed, hanging my clothes on the hooks and sending them aloft out of the steam of the bath. Several workers, I noticed, were similarly engaged.

I felt much refreshed by the bath and by the shave which followed in a little room next to the spray baths, where the factory barber, or rather one of his assistants, passed a razor swiftly across my chin. I was then led into a long hall with tables stretching down its entire length. A merry company of men was at breakfast, French for the most part, talking and chaffing each other

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

in excellent spirits. This was evidently a model factory. I drank some very passable coffee and ate a roll. Then, under the prompting of my guide, I rose from the long table and walked down the pleasant room. It was on the first floor, and great windows looked over a trim courtyard and away to a wooded country, stretching, as I knew, to the banks of the Rhine. Everything was neat and spare—the furnishings of steel tubing, the table of some light composition and the chairs of steel with canvas backs. An electric clock was upon one wall. The time, I noted, was half-past eight.

I was led through another corridor, wide and bare. On either side of it were rooms, the doors of which slid sideways instead of opening in the usual manner. At the end of this corridor was another door. Outside it were two light steel benches and a table on which were strewn newspapers and magazines. Beside the door was a little cluster of electric lights.

A red one was burning.

“We must wait,” said my conductor. “The Director is engaged.”

At that instant, however, the light turned from red to green.

“The Director is ready to see you,” said my conductor.

## I RECOVER THE REMAINS

He pressed a button in the wall and the door in front of us slid noiselessly sideways.

"The Englishman," he announced.

"Enter," replied a voice.

I entered and the door slid shut behind me.

I found myself in an office of the most modern description. The walls were washed a pale green and hung with several modern landscapes. A single filing cabinet of steel stood in one corner. In the centre of the room was a large steel and malachite desk at which a man was seated in a swivel chair. Between him and myself was another table, also of steel and malachite.

The man turned round in his chair as I crossed the room.

"Sit down," he said.

I sat down in the chair beside the second table. The man was now opposite me, the width of the bare table being between us. He held in his hand a dossier and I looked at him with interest. He was short with a sanguine complexion, hot brown eyes and a mass of snow-white hair swept back in a wave over his eyes. I have seldom seen a more striking face; it suggested both refinement and fanaticism. He wore a suit of dark grey, cut in the French fashion, rather square in the shoulders and narrow in the waist.



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"Mr. Ronald Briercliffe?" he said, looking up from the dossier in front of him.

"Yes," I answered.

"A Secret Agent—in other words, a spy," he continued.

"You have the advantage of me," I protested.

"My name," he said coldly, "is probably known to you. I am du Bertrand."

"You have sent for me," I ventured politely.

He sat regarding me and I found his gaze difficult to support. It was at once penetrating yet cold—the eyes of a man who had seen much in his life and respected little.

"By what right or for what reason," he inquired at last, "did you claim the body of Henri Monnier as that of your brother?"

"Would it not be more to the point if you explained why you thought fit to have me assaulted in Strassburg and confined for a night on your premises?" I retorted.

"I will answer your question, Mr. Briercliffe. I received yesterday evening an account of your remarkable proceedings at Oldenburg and I thought it well that you should be present at an operation for which preparations are now being made. I shall then be better able to decide how

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your interest in my affairs may be most effectively discouraged."

He paused and added with a wry smile :

"Meanwhile I must believe that you are anxious to obtain information regarding this establishment of mine. Well, Mr. Briercliffe, I have nothing to conceal and it may amuse you, while you wait, to be taken round."

He pressed a button beneath the table as he spoke. A door that I had not yet seen slid apart in the wall and a secretary stood in the aperture.

"Serron," said the Director, "show this gentleman over the factory. Bring him to Room 710 in half an hour."

I rose and followed the secretary into the corridor outside.

Walking towards me, his beard advanced, his face composed and solemn, came the Mighty Magistro.

## CHAPTER VII.

## I AM DELIVERED TO THE UNDERTAKERS

He stopped short on seeing me, and a light smile played about his lips.

"Good morning, Mr. Briercliffe. I am to have the pleasure of seeing you later."

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"So I gather," I said, smiling not less pleasantly than he.

Ruggiero turned to the man beside me.

"Remember that in half an hour you will deliver this gentleman in Room 710. Please do not allow him to be late for his appointment."

Whereat we passed each upon his way.

Relentlessly was I taken over the factory. It was built round three sides of a square. Two-thirds of the plant was devoted to the manufacture of chocolate and only the remaining third to cigarettes—a curious but, as my guide pointed out, an effective combination.

"People who don't smoke," he said, "invariably eat chocolates and those who are partial to chocolates seldom smoke."

We descended by a moving staircase to the ground floor.

"M. du Bertrand," I ventured, "is he perhaps a relative of the celebrated du Bertrand, deputy of Tours?"

"He *is* the celebrated du Bertrand," said the secretary shortly.

He led the way to a long room where raw chocolate was mixed in curiously complicated machines. But my mind was elsewhere. The waters were deeper than I had suspected. For this du Bertrand was, or rather had been, a very



big man indeed. Reputations are swiftly forgotten and he had not for several years come into public view; but no one behind the scenes of international life had yet forgotten this Cato of the Nationalists. In the debates which had determined French policy as embodied in the peace treaties, Clemenceau, compared with du Bertrand, had been as a sucking dove, while Poincaré, who, by his ruthless sacrifice of the small French investor, had placed his country temporarily at the head of an uneasy European hegemony, might be regarded as a gentle herald of reconciliation and peace. Du Bertrand was a fanatic and a man who had never made a secret of his fanaticism. He had fought in the war, though approaching the limit of military age. He had lost his only son at Verdun and he had, during the Peace Conference and the troubled years that had followed, been unceasing in his propaganda for a stern repression of any effort of the secular enemy of France to recover her place in the comity of nations. *Delenda est Germania* had been his motto. He had at one time made a bid for political power, but the blind fervour of his utterance had frightened even the most extreme parties of the Right, who listened with discomfort to an exaggeration of their views which reduced them to absurdity. Fire-

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eaters, willing on occasion to sing the song of the sword, were somewhat abashed to find themselves applauding a ballad of ancient Pistol.

Such was the man who had established a factory in Alsace-Lorraine, who was making millions close to the frontier of Germany, who had recently had in his service Henri Monnier of the British Secret Service and owned for a colleague Monsieur Valmont—otherwise known as Ruggiero or the Mighty Magistro. Here was food for reflection and some of it likely to be indigestible.

I had also to consider whether it might not be possible to make a dash for liberty. I could not believe that all the employees of the Sigma Works were privy to the unknown mischief which was evidently afoot. Was it not possible to appeal for help or break away by some unexpected movement? A moment's reflection convinced me that the chances of escape were small. I was unlikely to convince the people about me with a few well-chosen words that their director—one of the most powerful men in France—was for reasons as yet unknown to me associating with a notorious criminal and prepared, if necessary, to detain me on his premises by force.



Meanwhile I was being invited to admire the wonders of rationalisation applied to industry in the grand manner. Here were no workers sitting at slow-moving conveyers, monotonously performing the same small operation for hours together. So far as my untrained eye could perceive, they were simply watching machines which did the work for them; and the machines themselves, with their driving belts and glittering wheels and the thick stream of chocolate pouring hot from the vats, held a fascination and a beauty of their own.

"Each of our workers," said the little secretary, who seemed determined that I should miss nothing visible or invisible, "wears a special uniform on entering the factory. He is shaved on arrival and may take a bath. When his shift is over—and we do not work our men more than six hours a day for five days a week, he resumes his own clothes and returns to one of the company's houses if he is married, or to one of the company's flats if he is single."

He pointed through the window as he spoke. Some distance away, a mile perhaps, I could see neat rows of houses surrounded by gardens.

"Our village," said the secretary. "More than 5000 people live there, including wives and children, and each family has its own house."



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I saw a number of men leaving the factory. They were dressed in blue dungarees.

“That is one of our unloading squads,” said the secretary. “We have our own private railway and the raw materials are run straight into our sidings—milk, raisins, sugar, tobacco and so forth. Most of it is unloaded by machinery, but we have men to deal with the milk.

“Now you shall see the library,” he continued as we moved on.

The white metal door slid back without a sound and I found myself in a long high room with steel book-shelves running round the walls and down the centre.

“Each worker,” said the secretary, “is allowed four books a week. But only certain books may be taken from the shelves. The others are consulted here. We have, of course, highly organised classes, for we do not keep our workers idle in their spare time, unless they so desire.”

“You do a great deal for your workers,” I ventured, my eyes travelling round the shelves.

He nodded.

“Naturally,” he answered. “It has been proved statistically that the amount of work, even though it be purely mechanical, to be obtained

I AM DELIVERED TO THE UNDERTAKERS from an average staff increases rapidly as conditions are improved. Our problem economically is to ensure that our machines are continually working at a maximum. That is secured by keeping our staff as fresh and fit as possible. There is a point at which the element of fatigue or lack of interest is distinctly reflected in output figures. We have fixed it at about thirty hours a week for persons enjoying a certain minimum standard of comfort and provided with suitable recreation. The three factors—standard of living, hours of work and output—vary almost mathematically and our whole system consists in relating them in such a way as to get the greatest possible return on our capital.”

I looked without enthusiasm at the precise little man.

“It is slavery intelligently organised,” I said.

“There can be no other basis for a civilised community,” he returned complacently.

“Are there no independent spirits?”

“There is not even a union,” he said. “We have, instead, a long waiting list. Fathers put down their sons to enter our factory when they are born—just as in England you put down your boy for a public school.”

We were crossing the courtyard as he spoke.

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"I will show you now the other side," he said. "We employ mostly women in the cigarette factory."

I stood a moment to watch a shift of girls going on duty. They were, for the most part, young and wore a pleasant uniform of blue linen.

"We employ nearly 1000 girls," said the secretary.

He led me into a long room where tables were piled high with fresh scented tobacco dropping from the distributors. I had an impression of order, neatness and speed, but, though there was nothing inhuman or even mechanical in what I saw, something in me was oddly rebellious and unsatisfied. For all this comfort, cleanliness and well-being had but a single purpose. Even the rest and pleasure of these happy folk were being inexorably converted into output in accordance with the graphs of the accountants and statisticians.

We walked through endless rooms, the secretary giving a word of explanation now and again. I will not weary you with all that I saw and heard. Possibly it would have delighted and impressed the rational philanthropists who have tardily realised the wisdom of the ancient lawyer who deemed it a mistake to muzzle the ox that



I AM DELIVERED TO THE UNDERTAKERS treadeth out the corn. I can only say that it filled me with an increasing though perhaps a foolish melancholy.

The secretary paused at last.

"Well," he said, "you have seen everything now and I hope you are satisfied."

His pale eyes gleamed at me resentfully.

"You have seen in this factory a successful attempt to deal with human nature as it is. It is the creation of a genius—a man who has thought out these problems and has found a solution."

I like to hear a man speak of his chief with enthusiasm, but I liked less the tone of his next remark.

"I understand," he said, "that you have come here to spy upon our work. There is not much more you have to learn. We have now only to await your good report."

His tone of quiet scorn struck me like a whip and hot words of retort rose to my lips.

The secretary, however, had already put his hand to the inevitable button.

"I am to deliver you here," he said. The door before which we were standing slid back.

The secretary stood aside and I passed through the door, hearing it close behind me as I did so.

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Involuntarily I stepped back to the wall, for this is what I saw.

Immediately in front of me, lying on a polished table, in what appeared to be a room of the infirmary, was one of the two coffins with which I had travelled so uneasily from Offenburg. At one end of it stood the Mighty Magistro; opposite him was du Bertrand. There was no one else in the room.

Du Bertrand turned his white head in my direction.

"Punctually delivered, Mr. Briercliffe," he said. "But I expected no less of my secretary."

He paused and turned towards Ruggiero.

"You wish Mr. Briercliffe to be present."

The Mighty One smiled complacently.

"He has earned his place in the story," he said.

"That remains to be seen," said du Bertrand.

"I shall be interested to ascertain the reason of his pertinacious interest in the body of the unfortunate Henri Monnier."

He pressed a bell on the wall beside him. Somewhere a buzzer sounded and the door opened to admit a man in white overalls—my gaoler of the night before—carrying a small bag of tools.

"Good morning, Schlumberger," said du Bertrand pleasantly.

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The man bowed.

"Good morning, Herr Direktor," he responded.

Du Bertrand turned to the secretary.

"Is Dr. Gautier present?"

"He is waiting, Herr Direktor."

Du Bertrand turned back to the man with the tools.

"Then will you please open the coffin," he said.

The man approached the table in silence. I looked round the room. In front of a glass cabinet containing an evil array of surgical instruments, his great beard shining in the morning sunlight, stood the Mighty Magistro. Beside him waited du Bertrand with his fine face and the hot brown eyes; while, over against the door, the little secretary with his pin-striped trousers stood in an attitude of deference, which contrasted disagreeably with his recent lack of respect for my humble self. I watched them almost objectively, waiting with an odd detachment for the moment when all would be laid bare.

The man was now busy with the coffin, removing the screws one by one and laying them beside him on the table.

There was no sound in the little room.

Ruggiero moved forward a pace or two and



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laid one hand on the edge of the lid to assist the man who had withdrawn the screws. Calm and magnanimous, he looked across at me.

"For you, Mr. Briercliffe," he said, "I fear this is a painful moment. I will forbear to improve the occasion. I would merely emphasise that it is a wise man that knows when he is beaten."

The lid of the coffin was lifted back. A shrouded figure lay within and Ruggiero, taking in his hand a corner of the folded linen, uncovered the face.

There came a gasp of astonishment, a moment of recoil on the part of Ruggiero, and then, for a moment, we all stared in silence at the still form lying in the coffin.

For it was not the face of Henri Monnier that they saw, but the face of a frail old lady who lay in withered peace, her hands crossed above her breast.

"Not beaten yet," I cried out suddenly.

For this was my moment of triumph, though it was likely to be as short as it was sweet. For this I had worked in a lurching van by the light of a candle dealing with stubborn screws.

Du Bertrand was the first to speak.

"So you changed the name plates, Mr. Briercliffe," he observed.

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He stepped forward and covered the dead face.

"I regret the indignity," he said, "but it was none of my contriving."

He turned to Ruggiero.

"This will be a warning to you, Valmont. Do not underrate your opponents and be modest in success."

He walked forward and stood a moment in front of me. His head reached barely to my chin. He raised a hand and tapped me on the shoulder.

"I might use you," he said. "You are intelligent. But I fear you already have your allegiance and I will not insult you by assuming that you would change it."

He turned back to Ruggiero.

"Mr. Briercliffe is, perhaps, a pupil of yours," he said with a savage irony. "I understand that you are something of a conjurer."

To say that Ruggiero was out of countenance would do small justice to his ample habit of expression. His very beard drooped and withered.

"Give me time," he said at last. "I will set this matter right."

"The body of Henri Monnier will be in Munich by now," said du Bertrand.

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"I will recover it," said Ruggiero, and moved towards the door as he spoke.

Du Bertrand stopped him with a gesture.

"I perceive that you have not lost confidence in yourself. But I think you will be well advised to discuss the situation with me before you go."

Du Bertrand turned to me.

"Are your friends in Munich aware of the substitution?" he asked.

"I shall not answer that question," I said firmly.

"I will assume that they are not," said du Bertrand calmly. "Since changing the name plates you have had no opportunity of communicating with them. Henri Monnier will therefore be buried in all good faith by the mourning relatives of this good lady. That, at any rate, will give us time."

The little secretary still stood impassive by the door with the man Schlumberger beside him. Du Bertrand looked back at me.

"Take him away," he said suddenly.

The two men approached me.

"One moment," said du Bertrand.

He was standing at the head of the coffin. I often see him thus in my memory, meditating among the tubular steel fittings of the room



I AM DELIVERED TO THE UNDERTAKERS with the shrouded figure in its wooden shell lying beside him on the gleaming table.

"Where did you lodge him last night?" he asked.

"In Y basement," replied my late gaoler.

"Take him back there."

"Very good, sir."

The little secretary pressed a button and the door slid back.

"Stop," said du Bertrand.

He was still standing in the same position, his eyes narrowed, his lips firmly pressed together.

"No," he said slowly, "he should not remain in Y basement. Are all the chauffeurs' quarters occupied?"

"Garage 23 is empty," answered the secretary promptly. "Chauffeur Schmidt is on holiday."

"Confine him there for the moment," said du Bertrand.

"Very good, sir," said the secretary.

Thus did I pass from the presence.

I moved down the corridor by which I had been brought to my interview and was led through a door into a courtyard. We were approaching a long line of sheds built of concrete. The doors were numbered and above them was a second storey, its windows enlivened with green boxes, bright with flowers. We climbed a short stair-

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way and found ourselves in a corridor with numbered doors to right and left. Opposite door No. 23 the secretary paused, produced a master key, opened it and motioned me to enter.

"Here," he said briefly.

I looked at him.

"Do you often do this sort of thing?" I asked.

The little secretary stared at me.

"I carry out my instructions," he answered.

"Come," I said, "as man to man. Is it just in the morning's work for you to pry under coffin lids and lock up casual visitors in the garage?"

The little secretary's eyes gleamed. Before my eyes he was transformed into a man.

"I don't pretend to know who you are," he said. "But I will tell you this: we who serve du Bertrand serve him to the end."

The door slid shut behind me and I was left to my reflections.

What manner of man was this du Bertrand that commanded such unswerving service? Speculation, however, must wait. I must look first to my quarters.

There were two rooms. The first was furnished as a sitting-room, with a skylight. A steel book-shelf ran the length of one wall and there

were steel and canvas arm-chairs. The second room, opening from the first, contained a bed and a fitted wash-basin and it had a window on the courtyard. I tried the window and found it locked. It was in any case constructed of small panes which I could not remove without attracting immediate attention. I went back to the sitting-room and ran my eye along the books—half a dozen volumes of Anatole France; Sieburg's "*Dieu est-il français ?*"; Balzac's "*Contes drolatiques*" and a volume of de Musset's comedies. *Chauffeur* No. 23 was evidently of an intellectual turn of mind.

I looked at my watch. It was not yet midday. For how long was I to stay there? Presumably Ruggiero was now receiving his instructions and would shortly be on his way to Munich. He would have his work cut out. The body of Monnier was by now lying at Königstal and it would be buried, for that of Hilda von Esseling, on the following day.

Somehow Granby must be warned. He must know that the coffin lying at Königstal held the body of Henri Monnier and that it contained the message for which he had been waiting in vain. Here I was, however, a prisoner; and clearly nothing could be done till nightfall.

I pulled from the shelf "*La Rôtisserie de la*



Reine Pedauque ” and lost myself for an hour or so in the genial philosophy of Jerome Coignard.

## CHAPTER VIII. I WALK OUT OF THE PARLOUR

THE day passed. At midday I received a workman's rations—an admirable stew and a flagon of red Alsatian wine; there were also bread and cheese. I had previously had vague thoughts of assaulting the person who would bring me food, but abandoned the idea when two of them appeared, for I was unlikely to cope successfully with them both without drawing marked attention to the proceedings. My place of confinement was in one respect well chosen, for the garages overlooked the busy courtyard which was not for a moment empty. I should inevitably be seen and challenged the moment I started to break prison and violence was therefore out of the question.

Meanwhile I had leisure to reflect upon my mission. What was happening in this model factory which seemed only to exist for the harmless manufacture of cigarettes or, if you were a non-smoker, of chocolates and other toothsome commodities? Why had Françoise taken service within its walls? Why and how had she died? What was contained in the message with which

Henri Monnier had set out for Munich—a D message, so dangerous and so urgent that he had carried it in a capsule and swallowed it in his extremity on catching sight of the Mighty Magistro? What was the business for which du Bertrand, master of millions and still a secret power in the land, required the services of that mercenary villain? Granby had also mentioned Francis Wyndham. Was *he*, too, mixed up in this affair—whatever it might be?

It was abundantly clear that something serious was afoot. Françoise had not died for nothing. These men were bloody, bold and resolute and the stakes must be high to justify the risks they were running. It was not unlikely that, assuming me to know more than I had yet discovered, du Bertrand would decide that I also must fall by the wayside. P.B.3 in London, with a shake of his grizzled head, would open a ledger in his little room, strike off a name, make a brief entry upon a card index, and erase a number from his list. Françoise, yellow-haired, lovely, ageless and very cunning, was dead, and, if Françoise was dead, could I hope to survive? It would simply add a touch of irony to my fate that, in effect, I knew nothing of the plans which I was supposed to be undoing.

Granby presumably knew even less. He had



## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

yet to be informed of the death of Henri Monnier. He knew nothing of the message carried in the body, nor of the body's arrival in Munich—still less that it was awaiting burial as that of Hilda von Esseling, sister of the Graf von Esseling. That Granby should receive that information was vital. Therefore I must escape and the effort must be made at nightfall.

I have said that the window was locked, but I had already given some attention to the skylight. In a drawer in the dining-room were kept knives, forks and spoons, some of which I had used for my midday meal. Standing on the table and using one of the larger knives I had satisfied myself that, when the time came, the skylight would be a practicable exit and that it would be a simple matter to force the catch. I could not, however, emerge upon the roof in broad daylight and, once outside the garage, I must face the more serious problem of leaving the factory, which was surrounded by high walls and, as I had noted on the previous night, brightly lit with arc lamps with not enough cover for a mouse.

I sat by the window gazing out, across the broad and level square, at the clean horizontal lines of the workshops a hundred yards away. Once at midday a musical hooter had sounded and men



had moved out in companies. Again at five o'clock the same thing had happened. These were the shifts and, if somehow I could contrive to join one of them, all my problems would be solved.

I rose and again examined the room. A cupboard with its inevitable sliding door, which I had not previously noticed, caught my attention. I slid back the door and found that it contained the clothes of the absent chauffeur—a couple of suits, socks, collars, ties, shirts, and, in one corner—my spirits rose as I noticed it—a suit of overalls. There was even a peaked cap.

I waited till seven o'clock. My supper came at that hour, brought by my surly friend with the pipe in his throat and another man whom I had not seen before. I ate my meal hastily and as quickly changed into one of the suits which I had found in the cupboard. It went to my heart to leave my own good tweeds behind, but I felt that my transformation should be as thorough as possible. Accordingly I put on a blue shirt and a suit with purple stripes. Over this I drew the invaluable overalls.

A little later I climbed through the skylight and lay flat on the roof. The stars were now there in the sky and the lights of the factory glowed like a thousand eyes. A few late birds

passed over my head. I crawled to the edge of the roof. The slope was gentle and there was no risk of falling off. I moved quietly along till I found a convenient drain-pipe down which I slid safely to the ground.

I looked cautiously round the edge of the garage, hearing, as I did so, the hiss of water. Two men, clad in overalls like mine, were washing down a lorry.

I wondered what to do next. A yard or so away stood the main gate of the factory with its glittering lamps and the two neat lodges, one on each side. Beyond it was the road, at one end of which, as I knew, perhaps a mile away, was the model village or small town of the workers. At the other end, perhaps two miles away, was the little straggling town of Rheinau.

How was I going to pass the gate unchallenged?

I was standing in the shadow, ten yards away perhaps from the two men washing down the lorry, when, above the hiss of the water, I heard footsteps. A man appeared from round the corner whence I had come. For a moment I thought he was following on my tracks, but he walked past me, perhaps six feet away, and by a miracle, as it seemed, he did not see me.

"Jules," I heard him say.

One of the men straightened himself from the back of the lorry, where he had been bending to wash the springs. The new-comer said something to him in a low voice and for a while they conferred without my being able to catch a word of what they were saying. Then suddenly Jules uplifted his voice.

"Hell and damnation," said Jules.

"I'm sorry," said the new-comer.

"It's my evening off," continued Jules.

"Go you must," said the new-comer, who appeared to be some kind of foreman, "unless you can get someone to take your place."

"How the devil am I going to do that, at this time of the night?" demanded Jules, very loud and clear.

"The new man was to have reported at seven," said the foreman. "Name of Rottier."

Suddenly he swung round on his heels. I flinched back instinctively and the movement betrayed me.

"Hullo," said the foreman. "Who the devil are you?"

"It's the new man, perhaps," said Jules hopefully.

"Are you the new man?" demanded the foreman.

"Is your name Rottier?" demanded Jules.



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"Er . . . yes," I stammered.

"You're late," said Jules.

"But just in time," said the foreman. "You will take the lorry into Rheinau with Gaston!"

I came forward and touched my cap in a rough gesture of respect.

"Get on with it," said the foreman briefly.

Without another word he walked off and I found Jules grinning at me in all good fellowship.

"Eh bien, mon vieux, tu n'as pas fait mal," he said and thrust a packet of damp cigarettes surreptitiously into my hand as he spoke.

"'Night, Gaston," he said to the other man, who was now putting away the hose.

"'Night, Jules."

Jules went off whistling and I stood waiting to know what I was expected to do next. My companion, a man with sandy hair, said nothing but climbed into the driver's seat. He was evidently a man of few words.

"Start up," he called down to me.

I had never swung a lorry in my life, but obediently I grasped the handle. Fortunately the engine was warm and started at the second swing.

I climbed into the seat beside the driver.

We did not, as I had hoped, run straight to the

gates, but to the back of the square where we began loading up with crates. I sat in my seat, heart in mouth, while we took our cargo on board. Nobody paid the slightest attention to me, however, and the speed at which the lorry was loaded reflected the greatest credit upon all concerned. The whole job took less than ten minutes. Gaston then let in his clutch and we moved slowly towards the gate, the last of a string of lorries. A moment later we were on the road outside.

It now only remained to quit the lorry, and this last problem was solved for me in an unexpectedly easy fashion. We had proceeded about a hundred yards or so down the road when Gaston turned to me suddenly.

"There's a crate shaking at the back," he said. "Better go and fix it."

I climbed back from the driver's seat and made my way, over and among the cargo, to the tail-board. I found the loose crate and jammed it in more firmly among its neighbours. The lorry at the same moment slowed down, for we were climbing the fairly steep gradient which was to take us into Rheinau.

My opportunity had come. I slipped as quietly as I could to the end of the lorry and crouched down in the cramped space between



the tail-board and the last of the crates. We had slowed now to a walking pace. I must risk it. I looked cautiously to right and left. The road was deserted and the roar of the engine would be enough to drown the noise of my exit. I swung myself over the tail-board, hung a moment at full length and then let go. I came down on one knee, cutting the suit of overalls, but fortunately not the trouser leg beneath. I then bolted to the side of the road, where I found a ditch between the road and a ploughed field. Into it I cast my overalls and cap, watching, as I did so, the tail light of the lorry disappearing like a red star over the brow of the hill. I turned my back to the road and set out across the ploughed field.

I came soon to a little lane which climbed between open fields, parallel with the road which I had left. Half an hour's sharp walking brought me to the outskirts of Rheinau. I had decided that my best course was to go at once to the garage of the man Burkhardt, who, having been in touch with Monnier, might not only have information of importance, but also be able to help me on my way to Munich. I found the garage quickly by a lucky chance—just off the main street—a small place, with a couple of petrol pumps on the pavement and walls smothered with the usual



advertisements. A big man in dirty overalls was washing a Citroën.

"Monsieur Burkhardt?" I ventured.

He looked at me without enthusiasm.

"Concerning Henri Monnier," I continued.

His face became even more expressionless.

I opened my pocket-book and took from it a card. It was a perfectly ordinary visiting card on which any name you liked might be engraved. But if you looked at it carefully you found a small spot of black like a crooked star in the right-hand top corner, as though someone had been careless with the printing.

Burkhardt, let me remind you, was an ex-French agent and a friend of ours. He took the card and his face assumed quite a different expression.

"Good," he said, and pushed open a door which led into the little shop where he did his repairs.

"Well," he added, "what can I do for you?"

"I want to send a telegram addressed to Mr. Ponsonby, Poste Restante, Munich. I will cipher it for you in a moment. Meanwhile I need your advice. How can I best get to Munich as quickly as possible?"

"You mentioned Monnier," said Burkhardt anxiously.

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

"Monnier," I said quietly, "is dead."

The man drew a swift breath and his big frame quivered a moment.

"He was killed in the accident at Offenburg," I added.

"Not in the way of business, then?"

"I don't even know his business. I was hoping, in fact, that you might give me some idea of what he was supposed to be doing."

Burkhardt shrugged his shoulders.

"I know nothing," he said, "nothing at all. It's better not to know too much.

"Can you ride a motor-bike?" he asked abruptly.

"It is years since I tried," I answered.

"Better try now," he said. "You can have mine—not much to look at, but she will do, and the papers are in order. If anyone asks questions at the frontier you are my brother. Try to look like nothing on earth. That is my brother."

"Which way do I go?" I asked.

"You had better turn north. Cut through Oppenau to Alpirsbach and Ulm and then to Munich."

He led me by the arm to the back of the shop and introduced me to his motor bicycle, a French machine about three years old. He put it on

the stand, showed me how to start and stop it, discoursed upon its general temperament and the special peculiarities of the back brake.

"She will do eighty at a pinch," he said. "Kilometres, not miles."

"This is awfully good of you," I began. "Here is for expenses," and I handed him a thousand-franc note, which he took without a word and put in his pocket.

"Half-past eight," he grunted. "Better have a snack before you go."

He took me into the house and introduced me to his wife, a stout companionable woman of about forty-five. I was given an admirable omelette and one of the local sausages, with a cold potato salad and half a bottle of Alsatian white wine. I coded the message to Granby as I ate, telling him to expect me on the following day. I informed him that I had found the message from Monnier and that it was in the coffin with Aunt Hilda; I warned him that Ruggiero was in pursuit of it and urged him to take all possible precautions.

It was nine o'clock when I finally took to the road. There was a keen snap in the air, a promise of the first frosts of winter. I had a sudden feeling of elation when I breasted the rise from the town and saw some miles behind



me the glow of the Sigma factory. I had escaped from my enemies, and beyond the dark hills that stood across my path lay Königstal.

## CHAPTER IX.

## I AM CLOTHED IN PURPLE

I WILL not describe that journey in detail. Suffice it that at the frontier, which I crossed at Kehl, no difficulties, expected or unexpected, arose. I passed with my bicycle into Germany, took out a permit for fifteen days and set my machine upon its journey through the Black Forest, reaching Oppenau at three o'clock in the morning. Thence, leaving the bicycle in an all-night garage under a false name, I caught the milk train to Alpirsbach, where I changed trains, reaching Munich shortly after nine o'clock in the morning. Nowhere did I meet with any let or hindrance. All was now as it should be—except that I was dog-tired, unshaven, extremely dirty and dressed in a purple suit.

I went, on arrival, to the station hotel, took a bath, was shaved by the hotel barber, ate a good breakfast and then, arrayed in my purple suit but with fresh linen bought from the local haberdasher, I started forth to the Hofbrauhaus. It was five minutes past eleven o'clock when I turned into

that ancient establishment. Five minutes later I was talking with a rather shabby British tourist with piercing blue eyes and an apparently unlimited capacity for beer.

"I got your telegram," said Granby, "and you will be glad to know that Hilda von Esseling now lies in the mausoleum at Königstal. On receiving your telegram I asked the Graf von Esseling to have the mausoleum guarded by his servants. And now, sir, I think you owe me an explanation."

Granby was looking tired, but his eyes were twinkling as he added :

"But perhaps we had better wait. I am expecting someone."

"Hilda?" I asked.

"Hilda," Granby confirmed. "We take our elevenses here together every morning. She is late to-day, but never misses. So keep your eyes open, Ronald. Hilda coming in at yonder door is a sight to see."

"Really," I protested, "as a married man . . ."

"Are you?" said Granby with interest.

"I am referring to you," I said shortly.

Granby looked me over carefully.

"Well," he concluded, "I hope she likes your suit."

"Granby," I said, blushing deeply, "has she by

any chance . . . what I mean is . . . does she talk about me at all ? ”

“ She mentions your name occasionally.”

“ Look here, Granby,” I said in desperation, “ do you think I stand a chance ? ”

I leaned forward. He lifted his mug, drew back the lid and blew away the foam.

“ I think you are a lucky young fool, if you ask me. But don’t give her time to discover that she is about to make the great mistake of her life.”

He rose promptly from his chair as he spoke and I realised, with a sudden choking sensation in the throat, that he was greeting Hilda. Her smile changed abruptly as he stepped back and she caught sight of me.

“ Ronald,” she said, and with a flush on her cheeks—not there before—she came to the table and stretched out both her hands.

I rose and gripped them hard.

“ So you’ve turned up again, Ronald,” she observed.

“ Yes,” I said.

“ And now,” said Granby, “ after these cordial—not to say fulsome—greetings, we will cease to admire the facility with which you two young things express yourselves. We will order some beer for Hilda and more beer for me. Then Ronald will tell his tale.”



## I AM CLOTHED IN PURPLE

I was heard in silence and, when I had finished, the silence lasted for an appreciable time.

"So now," said Granby at last, "we know why Ronald is wearing that awful suit."

I knew, however, from the close attention with which he had followed my narrative that his flippancy was only skin deep. From the moment I had mentioned the appearance of Ruggiero upon the scene his eyes had never left my face.

His manner changed.

"So Françoise is dead," he said shortly.

"And poor Aunt Hilda has now to be unburied," added Hilda.

Granby put a hand on her arm.

"Not a nice tale, my dear, but we shall do our best, I promise you, to put things right."

He thought for a moment.

"Then du Bertrand is commander-in-chief," he said. "Wyndham and Ruggiero are merely his undertakers."

Again his manner changed. He turned to Hilda.

"Queer chap, Ronald," he said. "He gets a bright idea now and then—changing those name-plates, for example. The brain works in flashes—and after that the dark. He is a simple fellow at bottom."

"What's the matter now?" I asked in dudgeon.

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

I had done pretty well and felt that Granby's observations were irrelevant—not to say ill-timed.

“ I'm thinking of your remarkable escape from the Mighty One. It was so remarkable that, by your leave, we will take it again. You were shut up in a tight little room with the door and window locked. Nobody troubled to take away your money. There was a skylight which could be opened with a table-knife. There was a table-knife in the drawer. You naturally felt diffident about walking out of the factory in your excellent suit of tweeds, but you felt that, if only you had, say, a nice suit of overalls, it might be possible for you to escape unnoticed. So you opened the cupboard, and staring you in the face was a nice suit of overalls hanging on the peg. You got safely away into the courtyard and next began to consider how on earth you were going to get into the town. Enter Mr. Foreman of the lorries. Luckily he needed assistance. He said it very loud and clear. He needed someone whom he had never seen, but wearing a nice suit of overalls. It occurred to you, being a bright lad, that you answered more or less roughly to that description. He accepted you on the spot and off you went. Then you began to wonder how you were going to slip away into the night without exciting comment or raising



an alarm. Fortunately, just at that moment, the driver began to be troubled by a crate that had shaken loose at the back of the lorry. So he suggested that you should go behind and make it fast. By now the brain was working with quite astonishing speed and efficiency. You realised that this was an excellent opportunity for you to get finally away. So you abandoned the lorry and all went merry as a marriage bell."

Granby paused and looked at me quizzically.

"Well," he concluded, "doesn't it begin to strike you that you were a suspiciously lucky young man?"

"How suspiciously?"

"A helping hand at every turn—so to speak?"

"You mean that they *wanted* me to escape?"

"It occurs to me as a possibility."

"But why?"

"For several excellent reasons. Du Bertrand intends somehow to lay hands on the message. It must have occurred to him at once that it was most unlikely he would ever recover possession of the body of Henri Monnier. Therefore, his only chance of laying hands on the message was to allow you to get hold of it yourself. Du Bertrand accordingly arranged for you to escape.



You have, of course, been followed here to Munich and when you have obtained possession of the capsule—why, then he will pounce.”

“He is taking a big risk.”

“He has no choice but to take it. He relies on the element of surprise. Having successfully escaped his enemies, Ronald Briercliffe, rather pleased with himself, hurries off to Munich, makes the necessary arrangements for an autopsy, takes delivery of the message and, being off his guard, is promptly recaptured.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Well, let us suppose that the enemy is less ambitious. He has concluded that to recover the body is impossible. By releasing you, however, he can at least discover for whom you are acting. He assumed you would come straight to headquarters, so to speak. We may, therefore, now take it for granted that among his emissaries are one or two who discovered a moment ago that a mug of beer at the Hofbrauhaus would not come amiss. There is a gentleman yonder, for example, who seems to be combining business with pleasure. Ever and anon his nose is in the pot, but his eyes are well fixed upon the mirror in front of him.”

There was a short silence, broken at last by Hilda.

"My poor Ronald," she said.

"But hang it all," I protested, "what else could I have done?"

"Sent me a plain message," said Granby promptly, "and taken the first train to Timbuctoo or Leningrad."

He paused, took a deep draught of beer, and then took pity on my fallen crest.

"Never mind," he said. "It was bright of you to change the name-plates."

I did not answer for a moment, but continued to gulp hard, trying to swallow my mortification.

"I am sorry about Aunt Hilda," Granby was saying.

"It cannot be helped," said her namesake quietly. "Set against anything that helps to get at the bottom of these dreadful accidents, where my aunt rests cannot matter in the least degree. What is our next step?"

"We must find a doctor," answered Granby, "and I must have a word with your father."

Hilda looked at him gravely.

"The autopsy, of course."

Granby nodded.

"We need someone we can trust—a police surgeon perhaps."

Hilda shook her head.

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"Dr. Ludwig shall do this work for you," she answered.

"He has known me all my life—and a little before. You can trust him absolutely."

Granby smiled at her.

"Where is Dr. Ludwig to be found?"

Hilda looked at a little watch on her wrist.

"He will be in his consulting-room, I expect," she answered.

A few minutes later we were driving in a taxi down the Maximilianstrasse, that splendid street with the chestnut trees. We crossed the Maximilian bridge above the Isar, and presently found ourselves in the Wienerplatz, where we drew up before a polished door.

All three of us entered and waited in a small room until Dr. Ludwig should be disengaged.

Dr. Ludwig, when at last he appeared, was a round little man with gleaming spectacles and a kind face, loud in his delight at seeing Hilda. She took him quickly by the sleeve.

"Papa Ludwig," she said, "here are two Englishmen, Colonel Granby and Herr Briercliffe. They have something very important to say to you."

"Strange," said the little doctor, his eyes



twinkling behind his glasses; "they seem in the best of health."

"Herr Doctor," said Granby, "it is something graver than illness."

"There is nothing graver than illness," answered the doctor, "unless it be death."

"It is death," answered Granby quietly.

The doctor listened attentively as Granby explained the situation. Hilda, every now and again, put in a word, but I felt oddly detached. I sat a little apart from the others, on a hard, round chair, my eyes on Hilda, aching with the sense of her beauty and a love that I could scarce control. The effects of my long night ride were still upon me. My nerves were tight-strung and thought ceased as I gazed at her sitting there in the September sunshine, her hair gleaming from beneath her close-fitting hat.

But Herr Dr. Ludwig was speaking.

"How soon before death was the capsule swallowed?" he said to me.

"Only a few minutes," I answered, bringing myself back with an effort.

The doctor nodded.

"Does that make your task easier?" asked Granby.

The doctor nodded again and pulled out a fat gold watch.

"It shall be this evening," he said.

"You must come and dine with us," put in Hilda, "and sleep the night. You shall have a bottle of the Steinberger."

"That is bribery," said Herr Ludwig, "but I will come."

"I should perhaps warn you, Dr. Ludwig," said Granby, as we rose to go, "that there is some danger in this affair."

Dr. Ludwig turned and regarded us.

"Danger," he said. "You come to my little room and tell me such a tale of adventure as I have never heard before and then you talk to me of danger—to me who have passed all my life in this quiet town with nothing more adventurous than a week's walking tour in the Schwarzwald or a climbing expedition from Garmisch. I am with you, gentlemen."

His eyes were gleaming behind his spectacles. I have no doubt that he would not at that moment have changed places with stout Cortes, silent upon his peak in Darien.

We bowed ourselves out and left him standing by the window, his eyes still shining.

"A romantic little soul," said Granby quietly in my ear, as we went down the stairs to our taxi. "But with the really nice Germans it is a disease."

## I AM CLOTHED IN PURPLE

The taxi took us back to the Hofbrauhaus, where we picked up Hilda's car. Soon we were moving through the wide countryside by rolling woods and hills to Königstal.

I hope that the memory of that drive will never wholly leave me. I sat beside Hilda at the wheel. The midday sun was warm, the trees burnished with the hand of autumn, and in this pleasant road I could almost forget the nightmare of Offenburg with its crying wounded and disfigured dead; du Bertrand with his hot, unhappy eyes; the Assyrian profile of the Mighty Magistro, and the whistling throat of the night-watchman. Here the year turned slowly and sweetly to its close to the music of running streams and trees astir with copper leaves.

Hilda raised a gloved hand and I saw, perched on a little hill, the castle of Königstal, set perhaps a mile or a mile and a half back from the rushing waters of the Isar. Smooth grassy slopes led up to it and a great avenue of trees which stopped before a broad Grecian portico.

A tall figure awaited us on the steps as the car came to rest, bearded, long in the limb, with a back curved like that of some strange bird, concealing his height. I shall never look on a finer face than that of the Graf von Esseling. Here was one of the old German race, a graft of the stock



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that had followed Otto the Great, Henry the Fowler, and Kaiser Redbeard, a man with centuries of clean breeding in his blood; whom even the tragedy and catastrophe of the war had left unshaken—one of the Hindenburg breed who, amid the panic and desperation of these latter days, still stood unshaken and looked firmly into the future.

He welcomed us with grave courtesy, putting a hand for a moment on my shoulder.

“Hilda has put you in the blue room,” he said, “and you, Colonel, I hope will also stay with us.”

He spoke beautiful English, a little slowly and with a slight lilt.

We moved into the hall, paved with black and white squares, on which was spread a Bokhara rug, and so, by way of a winding stair protected by a wrought-iron balustrade, I reached the blue room.

“Luncheon in five minutes,” Hilda called up to me.

A man-servant was already unpacking my things. I stood by the window looking out across the wild, informal park to where, half hidden in the trees, I caught a gleam of white marble.

“That, sir,” said the man-servant, in answer to

my inquiry, "is the mausoleum. All the members of the family have been buried there since 1710."

So there, by a strange fate and my own impiety, was lying the body of Henri Monnier, a stranger within the gates, under fading flowers and guarded, as I knew, by the liveried servants of the house, so that no one should break in and steal. A sense of the unreality of all the events in which I had borne a part came over me again as I stood by the window and looked out over the forest towards the river. For what had I to do with these twisting plots and snares? Below on the terrace Hilda was walking in the pride and fairness of youth. Even as I moved, however, to keep her well in view, Granby came from the house with the Graf von Esseling. Together they were walking up and down, with grave faces.

At luncheon I sat opposite to Hilda, stealing now and then a glance at her, of which she was well aware, though she said nothing, but only looked out across the sun-swept grass and the old trees. The Graf talked of his country and of the pass to which Germany had been brought; of the seven million young men who, through no fault of their own, had no work to do in a world that, nevertheless, had urgent need of them—tinder for any spark from the agents of revolution.

"Who knows," said the Graf, "what the future may hold? I fear to speak."

He sat silent a moment.

"Herr Hitler's brown house in Munich is closed," I said.

"You cannot shut the door upon a generation," he replied.

After luncheon, let it be whispered, I slept heavily for several hours. For two nights I had not rested and that was my excuse. When I awoke it was already seven o'clock. I bathed and, in obedience to a message, did not change. I went down feeling wonderfully refreshed and joined the others in the library—a tall eighteenth-century room with many windows looking on the park.

Dr. Ludwig had arrived and shook me by the hand. Hilda, wearing a black frock, handed me a glass of sherry. I drank and looked at Granby over the rim of my glass. He, too, was in his day clothes and beckoned to me as dinner was announced.

"It's for nine o'clock," he said. "Just you and I and the Graf."

We moved down the long room towards the dining-room. On a table by the door I saw the black bag of the doctor.



At a quarter to nine we left the castle and walked down a darkened avenue between tall rows of trees. The sky was bright with stars and the thin edge of a great September moon glimmered over the waters of the Isar. We walked in pairs, the Graf beside the doctor, while I followed with Granby.

"No sign of Ruggiero," I said.

"No," replied Granby shortly.

"Or of Francis Wyndham," I continued.

"I saw Wyndham in Munich yesterday," said Granby. "Neither of them is far away, but, as I read it, we are unlikely to see them until we have got the capsule. Even then—well, I hope our defences are adequate. I have got three of the Graf's servants posted round the mausoleum and the servants in the castle have all been warned. I hardly think that even the Mighty One would dare to attack the Graf von Esseling in his own domain with all his servants about him. And yet—well they are simply bound to prevent us from reading the message."

A voice spoke sharply ahead of us. I jumped nervously, but it was only the gamekeeper challenging our approach.

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"Excellent, Johann," said the Graf, "you keep good watch. Has no one appeared?"

"No one, Herr Graf," answered Johann, a sturdy fellow wearing leather breeches and a green coat, evidently a livery of some kind. He carried a double-barrelled shot-gun in the crook of his arm.

"Adolf and Wilhelm also report all quiet."

"Good," said the Graf. "Keep a sharp lookout and warn us if you hear or see anything unusual."

"I will, Herr Graf."

The tall old man stood in front of the mausoleum—a pile of white and black marble extravagantly carved. Above the door two cherubs held between them a massive black marble curtain, its heavy folds drawn back sufficiently to permit of the opening of the door. A torch in the butler's hand cast a flickering light and the silk hat of Dr. Ludwig glimmered incongruously against the dark trees.

Startled by a faint clicking sound, I suddenly realised that it came from my own teeth, which were chattering.

"Pull yourself together," Granby spoke sharply in my ear, and touched me on the shoulder as he did so.

The scene shot into true focus and I saw but

## I TAKE THE PLUNGE

two old men push open a door, while a third held a torch and outside was the breathless September night.

And so we entered the tomb.

Inside, three black marble steps climbed to what I might describe as the main hall of the house of death. On either side of it lay the tombs where the ancestors of the Graf had reposed since the beginning of the eighteenth century. The light flickered up the side of the walls and I caught details of the profuse carvings on the funeral monuments: a white arm upheld in a gesture of grief; a veiled face averted in sorrow; Death with his scythe, a life-sized figure grinning in white marble against a sable background.

The butler lit two candelabra of burnished silver and set them at the head of an alabaster table in the midst of the hall. Beside the table, on a pair of wooden trestles, was the coffin on which the wreaths of lilies and roses were beginning to fade. The Graf bade the butler wait outside. The old servant turned, bowed and left the building.

"Come," said Granby.

He thrust a screw-driver into my hand. The Graf was already removing the flowers from the coffin and Granby and I worked in silence at the



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screws. Our work was soon completed and, as we raised the lid, a strong smell of formalin came from inside. We lifted the sheeted form and laid it on the table, beside which the doctor waited, clad now in a white overall with rubber gloves upon his hands.

He motioned us aside.

"Hold the light high," he said.

I did as he asked me. Curiously enough at that moment I felt no kind of emotion, either of terror, pity or excitement. I felt as waxen as the poor corpse which the doctor was so deftly unwrapping.

Throughout the operation, which took barely half an hour, no word was spoken, and, when all was done and the wrappings once more in place, the doctor, still in silence, handed something to Granby, who turned to me, saying :

"Put the body back."

He moved away as he spoke and I took it by the head and shoulders. The doctor lifted the feet and we laid Monnier back in his coffin.

At that instant there came a sharp exclamation from Granby, who was by the door.

"What's that?"

The strange dream in which I had moved shivered into fragments. I raised myself sharply

from the coffin and sped down the marble hall. Behind me came the Graf von Esseling and the doctor. One of them, I am not sure which, held the candelabrum on which the candle flames streamed wildly.

Granby was now at the door. In his hand there was an automatic. I heard nothing from outside, but, seeing Granby thus prepared, pulled out my own weapon and stood in readiness beside him. The Graf von Esseling and the doctor, obedient to a gesture of Granby's free hand, edged away to the side of the wall.

"What is it?" I whispered.

Then I heard something—a scraping noise outside the door, very faint, and then, to my horror, the key which was in the lock turned slowly, moved inwards towards us a little, trembled and at last fell with a light tinkle upon the stone pavement.

"Better rush them," I said to Granby.

"Wait," he said.

Suddenly I realised that, though he was still speaking, his voice was growing faint; it was frail and thin, like wind through winter trees. His face wavered and he seemed to be slowly sinking to the floor. I saw him trying to rise, crawling towards me. From an infinite distance I heard his voice.

"Death and his scythe," it whispered . . .  
 "under the urn."

Then I, too, was lying on the floor, with a weight upon my limbs . . . No . . . I was wandering, lost and terrified, in a great and naked wood through "ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang." What did it mean? And what was this mist that came creeping in a sullen cloud among the ferns?

. . . . .

"Hold him up against the tree. That's better."

A voice, speaking harshly in German, sounded in my ear with a staggering and abrupt distinctness.

I was standing upright, firmly held in position against the trunk of a tree. An electric torch was flashing in my face. Behind it I was aware of a crowd of men, for the most part in black shirts and breeches of brown leather. Then I realised that my hands were tied behind me and that Granby, beside me, was in a similar case. The Graf von Esseling and the doctor, whom I next perceived, were not bound, but were held, each by a couple of the black-shirted men; while lying on the grass dappled with shadows under the climbing moon were two forms which I recognised as those of the Graf's butler and the gamekeeper.



## I TAKE THE PLUNGE

Finally, over against the door, his beard thrust out, stood the Mighty Magistro. Beside him was another man, at the sight of whom my heart went cold. Tall, slim and fair, but not bearded as I had seen him last, Francis Wyndham leaned negligently against the marble side of the mausoleum. One thing more is to tell. A short spare man, also in the black uniform, was coiling some rubber tubing, one end of which was attached to a little engine on wheels, consisting, so far as I could make out, mostly of a cylinder.

A gust of words came to my ears.

"Efficient and quite painless."

It was the voice of the Mighty Magistro. And it came to me at first like a voice upon a wireless not yet properly adjusted.

Somewhere out of sight an order was barked in German and the men in black shirts who were swarming round the scene drew themselves up and stood in military formation. They stood about us in rows in the moonlight. Whence had they sprung—these soldiers from the dragon's teeth?

Francis Wyndham was speaking.

"Very successful, Ruggiero," he was saying, "a credit to your remarkable organisation."

The Mighty Magistro bowed.

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"Herr Hauptmann Fritz," he called.

A short man in a black shirt came forward and raised his hand in the Fascist salute.

"Search that gentleman," said the Mighty Magistro, indicating Granby.

I could see in the moonlight that Granby's face was running with sweat. He had evidently suffered more from the gas than I had. Herr Hauptmann Fritz ran what seemed to be a practised hand over Granby and withdrew from his waistcoat pocket a tiny flat tin, resembling closely the tins in which antipirin, a substitute for aspirin, is sold.

"What does this mean?"

An imperious voice rang out suddenly and all eyes turned to where the Graf von Esseling, very tall and with dignity unimpaired, stood between his captors.

Wyndham did not answer for a moment. Then he looked at the silent men in their black shirts and leather breeches.

"Tell him yourselves," he said briefly.

"You deal here with the young Guard of the National Socialists," said the man who had been addressed as Herr Hauptmann Fritz.

"We have been patient long enough," spoke up a man from the ranks. "We have long known that the Graf von Esseling is not our

friend. To-night we find him with foreign spies plotting against the Fatherland."

A low murmur broke out from the company. Some of the men pressed forward.

"Stand back, all of you," said the Graf, and such was his authority that for a moment no one stirred.

"What do you expect to gain by tearing Germany to pieces?" continued the Graf.

"Freedom for our country . . . no foreign tribute. All Europe is arming. . . . We, too, must have weapons . . . death to the enemies of the Fatherland."

Voices came from here and there. Two or three of the men, standing together, began to shout in unison: "*Tod . . . Tod . . . Tod.*"

Ruggiero and Wyndham were conferring apart, and I saw the latter nod at one of the men in black, who turned to his companions. The whole group darted forward. The Graf von Esseling did not flinch as they came. In a moment they had seized him and flung him to the ground.

Ruggiero turned his great head, cocking it slightly on one side as though to say: "Is this to be permitted?" Wyndham nodded and then moved forward into the shouting mass of men. I don't know what he said to them, but he was



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obviously directing rather than trying to suppress the tumult. The men stood back a moment so that I saw the Graf on one knee, blood running across his cheek where it had been cut beneath the left eye. Granby was struggling with those who held him and his face was grey in the moonlight.

“To the river with the old dog.”

Herr Hauptmann Fritz was speaking—his large slit of a mouth pressed in a cruel line, his eyes narrowed and merciless.

“To the river with them all,” he shouted.

The black figures rushed at us. They were plucking at my hands and knees. A searing pain tore my wrists as the string which bound them broke. I was lifted up, kicked, jostled and held in the midst of a group of brutal and efficient hands. Before me, as though swaying on a litter, was the tall form of the Graf von Esseling, his white hair shining in the darkness.

I was half-carried, half-dragged down a steep bank, and through the trees I saw a sudden gleam of water. I fought as best I could, but there were half a dozen of them about me and there was little I could do.

“English spies . . . foreign dogs.”

Words such as these and other less printable observations were dinned into my ears.

## I MEET THE OLD WOMAN OF BRENTFORD

Then, suddenly, they swung me and let go.

In one wild glance I saw the dark, mysterious forest and the riot of black figures tilted at an unnatural angle as I hit the cold, inhospitable waters of the Isar rolling rapidly.

### CHAPTER XI.

### I MEET THE OLD WOMAN OF BRENTFORD

THE shock of the cold water cleared from my wits the last fumes of gas. The Isar is a swift stream, and even in autumn, after all the summer suns, its waters are keen and cool. I rose to the surface and there in the moonlight, perhaps a yard from me, I perceived the head of the Graf von Esseling, his white locks showing against the dark foliage on the bank beyond. A faint shouting came from the already distant scene of our undoing. Of Granby there was no sign.

Two strokes brought me to the side of the Graf. The old man was quite exhausted and his lips were blue in the moonlight. He was calm, however, and still conscious.

"Turn on your back, Herr Graf," I said.

But his mind seemed far away. He murmured something I could not catch.

I caught him by the shoulders and began as



best I could to pull him towards the bank. It was then that I discovered the true speed of the Isar, which was running like a mill-race. To struggle against it was impossible. I accordingly let the current bear us down together, contenting myself with keeping the Graf's head above the water and looking to right and left for a practicable place to land.

But fortune played me an evil trick. I drew close into the bank, seeking as best I could to find in the darkness a spot where it sloped down to the water's edge, but finding none, for everywhere the bank was proud and precipitous. Our floating bodies were caught in an eddy which twisted me violently about and, a moment later, I felt myself caught and held. The drooping branches of a willow had me fast and I lay bobbing helplessly up and down, amid various flotsam and jetsam, the weight of the Graf heavy upon my arm. Kick and struggle as I would, I could not free myself from the willow.

"Can you get hold of a branch, sir?" I remember shouting in the ear of the Graf, but there was no response.

The old man lay water-logged in my arms, unconscious, possibly dead.

Soon I must go down myself—for here the stream ran very strongly and the boughs of the



willow were bent beneath the force of the water and the combined weight of the Graf and myself, so that every now and again my head went under and I got a mouthful of sharp water.

Holding the Graf with one arm, I tried to find a branch to which I could cling with the other hand. This, indeed, I presently succeeded in doing, so that I hung, my head just above water, holding to the willow desperately with my left hand while my right arm supported the Graf against my shoulder.

It could not last long. There was no further strength left in me to raise the old man, who was well over six feet in height, nor could I ever have pulled myself up from the river. I was growing colder every instant and I knew full well that I could not hope to hold fast for more than a very limited time. I shouted feebly, but it seemed to me as though my voice must be drowned by the rushing stream and the wind that was rustling the trees.

The tranquil forest and flowing water, viewed from the surface of the river, made a picture which I shall not easily forget; for my senses were sharpened by the peril in which I was caught. The far bank of the Isar was shrouded in a faint mist through which loomed the majesty of great trees. There was something inexorable and

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piercingly indifferent in this beauty of white veils and dark foliage. Loveliness was on the face of the waters and would still be gracious when I was sodden beneath or breaking the surface, a sightless horror under the moon.

Once more I think I shouted, but one thing only do I clearly recall—the agony of the moment in which my fingers slipped upon the branch and I felt myself falling back into the river.

. . . . .

The next thing I remember was the sound of my own voice saying peevishly :

“ You are burning my lips. Take me away from the fire.”

Then, at a great distance, someone else began to speak in German.

“ Take no notice of that. We must keep him warm at all costs.”

Warm I undoubtedly was—a glow spreading through my limbs till my fingers and toes ached and tingled. I stirred and opened my eyes.

Above my head was a green parrot in a cage swinging from a little bar and regarding me with a beady and malevolent eye. I was in a low room with a raftered roof and white walls. From some of the rafters hung flitches of bacon and beyond I caught a wink of sunlight on copper pans. I raised myself on an elbow.

## I MEET THE OLD WOMAN OF BRENTFORD

"Lie down, Mein Herr," said a voice. "You must keep well covered."

I looked round wonderingly. I was stretched on a pallet. Covering me was an old bear-skin and I was wearing the most curious clothes—a rough shirt and some woman's under-clothing of thick wool. In my mouth there was a taste of fire.

A face swam into view—a lean face with bright blue eyes.

"Granby," I said, and memory came back to me so sharply that I could feel again the wet bough of the willow slipping through my fingers.

"Feeling better?" he asked. "Limbs all in place? Head screwed on?"

I moved my head and yelled involuntarily.

"Neck a bit stiff," said Granby. "It shall be rubbed presently."

"Where am I?" I asked.

"That's right," said Granby; "quite the proper thing to say."

"The Herr must now drink this," said a soft voice.

I turned my head with difficulty. A large woman in the fifties, with grey hair neatly drawn off her forehead and secured in a bun at the back of her skull, was standing beside me. She wore a clean



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white apron over a russet gown. Her face was lined and seamed with countless wrinkles like a winter apple; her eyes were brown and smiling; her expression one of grave concern. Her sleeves, rolled up to the elbow, revealed a pair of stout arms, suggesting that here was the sort of person that felled an ox every morning before breakfast. In her hands she held a bowl from which steam arose. I took the bowl. It contained hot venison broth which I drank for the nectar it was.

"We are in the cottage of Johann the game-keeper," Granby explained. "I was thrown last into the river and I followed you and the Graf down-stream. I raised a shout every now and then and hoped for an answer."

"I heard nothing," I said. "I was too busy with the Graf. Where is he, Granby?"

Granby smiled reassuringly.

"I packed him off to the castle hours ago."

"But how did you get us out of the river?"

"I saw you caught by the willow and succeeded in landing myself to give you a helping hand—not an easy matter. Once I had struggled to the bank, however, I had the luck to run plumb into Frau Hauschmidt here, who was looking for her husband."

## I MEET THE OLD WOMAN OF BRENTFORD

The good dame, hearing her name, nodded and smiled. I held out the empty bowl.

"Besten Dank," I said.

"Perhaps the Herr will take another bowl?" she suggested.

She took the bowl and hastened away to the far corner of the room where a wood fire crackled in a wide chimney. She brought me some more of the broth and then left the room.

"You have seen Frau Hauschmidt," said Granby. "She picked up the Graf as though he had been a baby and she had you both out of that willow tree by the scruff of the neck as easily as you or I would have pulled out a couple of beagles. I half expected her to haul you both off to the cottage then and there, one under each arm. We laid you on the bank, however, and I sent her to get help. Fortunately, Johann's cottage was only a few hundred yards away and, when she got to it, she found that Johann himself, battered and furious, had just returned. Three men in black had taken away his gun and he was looking for another. It was Johann who made all the arrangements. He sent his eldest boy to the castle with a message and improvised a litter. We brought you both here and Hilda came down with some servants and took away her father. He was just beginning to sit up as we got him to the car."

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"Is he really all right?" I asked.

"Nothing broken," answered Granby, "and Dr. Ludwig is at the castle."

I considered this for a moment.

"Why aren't we also at the castle?" I asked.

"Your fault," said Granby. "You simply refused to come to life again and would certainly have been stone dead before we could have got you home. In any case this is as good a general headquarters as we are likely to find. It now remains to get busy. I've already sent to the police for reinforcements and the mausoleum has been occupied by a whole detachment."

"Locking the stable door," I commented wearily.

"Not at all," he promptly returned.

"You forget, or perhaps you didn't hear, my message *in extremis* . . . Death and his scythe . . . under the urn."

"You put the message there?"

"I did."

"But I saw it taken from you by the black-shirts."

"That was another one. Last night was a pretty poor show, but I was just a little less of a fool than I looked. I didn't expect to be attacked by a whole army corps equipped with the latest



weapons, but I was pretty certain that an attack would be made on us as soon as we had obtained the capsule. I had therefore provided myself with a duplicate, meaning, in case of need, to leave the original behind in the mausoleum to be recovered later. Monnier's capsule is still where I left it and it is now guarded, though they know it not, by all the king's horses and all the king's men."

"Good," I said.

"Not bad," said Granby.

"But who were the black-shirts and why should they take orders from Ruggiero and Wyndham?"

"The local fire-eaters . . . young unemployed . . . you know the sort . . . love of country . . . hatred of the foreigner. I can't think how Wyndham comes to be in authority. . . . But it was a good move. I was expecting an ambush, but I never bargained for a political riot."

"So the Mighty Magistro is no wiser than he was before," I commented after a pause.

"He is at this moment sitting in his lair, I trust, with wet linen round the head, trying to make sense of an odd combination of Arabic numerals and letters of the Greek alphabet."

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

"When do we get the real message?" I asked.

"Now," answered Granby.

"Why not before?"

"I preferred to rest the weary limbs and devote my small remaining strength to saving your wretched life. I thought it worth an effort. Sorry if I was wrong."

"Thank you," I said.

"What do we do next?" I added after a pause.

"Clothes," said Granby, pointing to a suitcase.

I rose stiffly from the bed and divested myself of a flannel petticoat.

"We go to the mausoleum, I suppose?"

"We do," said Granby. "Escort will be arriving shortly."

"Escort?" I inquired.

"I am taking no more risks. I have formed a very high opinion of Wyndham and of Ruggiero."

"But surely they cannot attack us in broad daylight," I protested, as I knotted my tie.

"I have no idea what they can or cannot do. We are completely in the dark. We don't know where the Mighty One has his base or what are his resources. He may be turning up next as President of the Reich or the Archbishop of Mainz."

## I MEET THE OLD WOMAN OF BRENTFORD

At that moment Frau Hauschmidt appeared. I thanked her for what she had done for me and inquired after her husband. He was, it seemed, recovered and had gone, in fire and fury, to the mausoleum to increase the guard about it.

"And I," she said, picking up a large basket, "must go to the village, if the Herren will permit."

Here she had a fit of sneezing. The cottage, shaken to its foundations, but being stoutly built, survived.

"It is nothing," she said when the typhoon had abated. "Would the Herren, if they leave the cottage, put the key in the flower-pot to the left of the door?"

Here she sneezed again and the spoon rattled in my empty bowl.

Frau Hauschmidt, with a gesture of annoyance, crossed the room, pulled open a drawer of the dresser and took out a large muffler of yellow wool, which she wound about her ample throat and chin.

Then she went briskly forth and we heard her footsteps die away along the path.

Granby glanced at his watch.

"Five past eight," he said. "The escort is late."

Granby began to show his impatience by



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walking up and down the room, gazing at frequent intervals out of its single window.

"Hadn't we better risk it?" I ventured at last.

"The men had orders to be here at eight," he said. "I can't think why they are so late in coming."

Footsteps sounded outside as he spoke. He sprang to the window, but drew back in disappointment.

"Only Frau Hauschmidt," he said. "She has forgotten something."

Frau Hauschmidt came briskly up the path and, reaching the porch, began fumbling with the latch. Granby walked to the door and pulled it open. The old woman, breathing heavily, entered the room. She moved to the table, on which she placed her basket, and began to unwind her muffler.

"You haven't seen my escort by any chance?" Granby inquired.

"On the contrary," came a resonant voice, "we had a very warm encounter."

I wheeled about.

The yellow muffler, now fully unwound, had revealed a curly beard and two arrogant eyes gleamed at us from beneath a battered hat trimmed with roses.

## I ENTER THE ROOM OF CHAINS

The Mighty Magistro, an automatic in his right hand, an incongruous figure of farce but for that unpleasant little weapon, stood regarding us.

At the same instant a sharp whistle sounded from outside.

## CHAPTER XII. I ENTER THE ROOM OF CHAINS

WE stared at him a moment in silence. Then Granby made a sharp movement.

"No, Colonel," came the voice of the Mighty Magistro, in a tone that suffered no misunderstanding. "You will stay where you are, please."

There came the sound of footsteps outside. The door was pushed open and half a dozen men entered the room. At sight of them my heart went cold, for they were all wearing the livery of the Graf von Esseling's gamekeepers—the green coat and the leather breeches. It seemed that even the Graf's own servants were not to be trusted.

Three of them attended to Granby and three to myself. We were turned about and led off at a rapid walk down the little path which led to the main road running into the village. In the road two cars were waiting, into which we were hustled speedily. Granby and Ruggiero went

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

in the leading car. I and my three gamekeepers followed.

We started off at a great pace. The cars were open, but the hoods were up.

I turned upon the man next to me, a little stocky fellow with a heavy moustache of the Hindenburg pattern.

"You are servants of the Graf," I said. "Why do you betray your master?"

"Last night I was differently dressed," he said.

I remembered then that I had seen him only a few hours previously, outside the mausoleum. He had been wearing a black shirt and the breeches of the Nazi shock troops.

"You claim to be patriots," I began.

"Shut your mouth," said my companion briefly. "We have nothing to say."

We were running away from Munich and presently, turning to the left, began climbing a long and winding hill. The road was narrow but with an excellent surface. It went up through beeches and pines, till presently we reached a small meadow, tilted at a fairly steep angle. At the far corner of the meadow was a house or Schloss, but it differed considerably from Königs-tal. Part of it was evidently old, for a great tower partly smothered in ivy rose above the tree-tops. Annexed to the tower was a massive



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block of buildings dating, as I judged from my first brief glance, from the fifteenth century. The rest of the house, however, was exclusively modern—being built of concrete in two storeys and enclosing the three sides of a square. There were many windows in the new part of the house, wide and gleaming in the sunshine, contrasting vividly with the grim arrow slits in the tower and the mullioned windows of the older part.

Francis Wyndham, leaning against the doorpost, smiled pleasantly upon our arrival. By the time I had alighted from the car Granby had disappeared between two of his keepers and Wyndham gave all his attention to me.

"My friend Mr. Briercliffe," he said. "Old times are come again."

We entered a large hall with a gallery running round three sides of it, sparsely stocked with furniture suitable to the period. A great tapestry, depicting the Raising of Lazarus, hung over the wide hearth.

My eye went to it instinctively.

"Life triumphant . . . life renewed from the tomb," came a familiar voice.

I turned and saw the Mighty Magistro. He was standing in the middle of the hall with Granby.

"Flemish, if I'm not mistaken, and of the early sixteenth century," Granby ventured.

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“A high-warp tapestry attributed to Peter Van Aelst and worked in Brussels,” said the Mighty One. “Note the shield in the left-hand bottom corner inscribed with the letter ‘B.’ Such inscriptions were required by law under the Imperial Edict of 1528 in order to indicate the town of origin. The narrow border of flowers—in striking contrast with the subject—dates the composition with tolerable exactitude. You will doubtless perceive a striking similarity of feeling and design between this example and the twelve Acts of the Apostles executed by the same craftsman to designs by Raphael for Pope Leo X. The subject is symbolic and fittingly represents the aim and purpose of this establishment. For here, too, life is renewed.”

“In other words,” said Wyndham dryly, as the Mighty One paused for breath, “this is the clinic of Dr. Axisus.”

“And Dr. Axisus?” Granby inquired.

“Myself,” said Wyndham.

Meanwhile a servant had appeared, bearing a tray on which stood a tall slim bottle, with four green glasses.

“First you will drink with us?” said Ruggiero, pouring out the wine. “This is a Steinberger Cabinet of a famous year.”

We drank and, as the golden liquid went down

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my throat, I felt suddenly braced. Was it the wine? Or was it the thought that we had got to grips with our enemies at last?

Granby set down his glass.

"To business," he said.

Wyndham nodded his head.

"My business," he stated, "is with Mr. Briercliffe. I will leave you, Colonel Granby, to finish your wine with the Signor Ruggiero."

He bowed elaborately and turned back to me.

"Will you come this way?" he said quietly.

I rose obediently and followed him. He pushed open a green baize door beneath the staircase and I found myself in a broad well-lit corridor, evidently part of the clinic and of recent construction. A door slid sideways and we passed into a pleasant room furnished with steel tubular arm-chairs and a glass table, on which stood the preparations for some kind of chemical experiment. Wyndham pointed to a chair in silence.

I sat down.

He stood regarding me a moment, and the look in his eyes, for all his indolent pose, was venomous. Francis Wyndham was running fast to seed. The veneer was wearing thin; he was a tired man, whose disappointments had begun to



tarnish his fine pretences. The old insolence had curdled to a sour vindictiveness which promised ill for any who might seek again to cross his purposes.

I braced myself against the back of the ridiculous modern chair.

"Briercliffe," he said, leaning suddenly forward, "I am going to put my cards on the table."

"All of them?" I asked. "I shall still suspect an ace or two of remaining up the sleeve."

"I shall show enough of my hand to enable you thoroughly to grasp the situation," he responded. "To begin with, I frankly do not know how much you or Granby have discovered. I do know that someone, Henri Monnier by name, was recently entrusted with certain information by a female British agent who had introduced herself into the Sigma factory. Monnier regarded that information as so important that he carried it in one of your regulation capsules and swallowed it at the moment of death. That message must be recovered. We hold Colonel Granby as a hostage. He has on several previous occasions successfully interfered with my plans and it would be a pleasure to destroy him here and now. But I am prepared to let him go unharmed if you will follow my instructions."

## I ENTER THE ROOM OF CHAINS

I stared at him in realistic astonishment.

"I don't quite follow you," I said. "You say that you want to recover the message of Henri Monnier. But Ruggiero himself relieved Colonel Granby of that message only last night outside the mausoleum."

"Don't play the fool with me," Wyndham snapped. "Ruggiero removed a message, but it was not the message we wanted."

"How can you know that?"

"For two reasons. First, the message, when we came to read it, would not make sense."

"There are such things as cyphers," I murmured.

Wyndham laughed.

"Have you never heard Ruggiero on the subject of cyphers?" he retorted. "He claims to read fluently one hundred and seventy-four different varieties. Anyhow, he was able to satisfy himself, after an hour or two, that the message was not in cypher, and he might have spared himself the trouble if he had thought a moment."

"Indeed?"

"The capsule in which the message was enclosed had never been swallowed. A simple chemical test sufficed to establish that. It follows that the real message is still in the mausoleum. For all we know it is still in the body of Henri

Monnier. I am ashamed to say that we did not grasp the real position until early this morning. Naturally I went at once to the mausoleum—only to find it guarded by the local police. That, of course, not only proved that the message was still there, but convinced me that, short of starting a civil war, we should be unable to lay hands on it. I therefore decided that, as we could not get the message ourselves, we must send you to obtain it for us.”

“So that is what you want?”

“Exactly.”

“You over-rate your powers of persuasion,” I said.

“Come with me,” he responded. “I have something to show you. And let me explain, as we go, that I am king of this particular castle. You have seen part of our organisation—the men in the black shirts.”

“Then they were not the disciples of Herr Hitler?”

“They were our own men. This morning they wore suits of bottle-green. They will wear any livery and perform any service that I or Ruggiero ask of them. They are men dedicated to our purposes and they have their reward.”

I was now walking after him, across the room.



## I ENTER THE ROOM OF CHAINS

We reached the corridor outside. To outward seeming I was unimpressed, but my heart was as water, for I knew Wyndham of old and I did not doubt that he had infamous means at his disposal.

We shortly found ourselves back again in the wide hall. It was empty and we crossed it towards a small door, which Wyndham opened. The door gave on to a winding stair. I perceived, as I began to mount it, that we were inside the ancient tower which I had observed from outside on our arrival. We climbed perhaps twenty or thirty feet. There was a creaking of bolts. Wyndham was opening another door. He stood aside and I entered.

The circular room was bare, lit only by two arrow slits, through which the morning sun was streaming sharp and clean as a sword-blade. In the exact centre of the stone ceiling was a stout iron staple. It carried a pulley, through which ran a light steel chain.

"Well?" I said impatiently.

Wyndham had walked across the floor and had gathered up in his hand, lovingly, a few links of the chain. Then he dropped them, so that they fell with a light clash upon the paved floor.

"It would bear the weight of ten men," he said.

I followed his gaze. On the end of the chain was a pair of steel rings, like handcuffs.

"Your friend Granby," pursued Wyndham quietly, "will be brought to this room. The steel bracelets will encircle his ankles. He will hang so—until he dies."

Wyndham's hands were again playing with the chain. Again he released it to thrust one hand into his breast pocket, from which he produced a cutting torn from a newspaper.

"An instance from real life," he said, "will more vividly than any eloquence of mine bring home to you the consequences of such a form of suspension."

I took the cutting and read :

*Tragic Accident on the Glacier of Zinal.*

"Charles Baudoin, twenty-five years of age, Vaudois, and Robert Hervieu, twenty-seven years of age, of Lausanne, were making the ascension of the Dent Blanche and were crossing the Zinal Glacier when the former fell into a crevasse fifteen metres deep. He hung suspended by the rope. Hervieu made every effort to extricate his unfortunate companion, but in vain. He accordingly started down at four o'clock in the afternoon for assistance. A search party from Zinal under the experienced leadership of a local guide was at once organised and the crevasse was reached at nine o'clock in the evening. Charles Baudoin

on being pulled to the surface was found to be dead. The doctor accompanying the search party stated that the unfortunate man must have expired less than half an hour before the arrival of his friends. His feet were entangled in the rope and he had hung head downwards for more than seven hours."

I handed the paper back, not daring to speak, and Wyndham looked at me a moment.

"The reporter omitted one rather unpleasant detail," he said. "The eyeballs of the unfortunate man had burst owing to the strain of the position. Not a pleasant death, Briercliffe? And not a quick one either."

I made a swift movement but, before my hand was up, Wyndham had spoken:

"Stand back."

His voice snapped like a whip-lash; his hand was in his pocket and thrust towards me.

"Now," said Wyndham sharply, "you know what will happen if you refuse to go for the message."

"And if I consent?"

"You will remain here with Granby till our work is finished. If all goes well, you shall, upon my honour, be released. If we fail——" He paused a moment.



"In that case," he added, "I shall not be here to release you. All will be over by the 7th October."

"In seven days?"

"In seven days."

I leaned against the stone wall and looked steadily out of the arrow slit, which threw a bright sword of light across the set face of Wyndham; across the light hair, the fine eyes and the loose mouth.

"I accept," I said slowly.

My heart was bitter with defeat as Wyndham turned without a word and motioned me to follow him down the winding stairs.

Yet how could I have chosen otherwise?

Ten minutes later I stood with Wyndham beside a car which had drawn up in front of the house. Sitting in the back of it was a man dressed in a black coat and a bowler hat. He was staring straight in front of him and took no notice of Wyndham or myself. Wyndham, following my gaze, drew me aside.

"A strange companion," he said, "and even stranger than he looks. It is my duty to warn you against him."

"Let us start," I said impatiently. "I have undertaken to get the message."

"No one," continued Wyndham smoothly,

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"is admitted to the mausoleum without a signed order from the Graf von Esseling. Therefore we must take you to Königstal. You are unlikely to see the Graf himself. He has not yet recovered from his experiences of last night and is at the moment being nursed devotedly by his daughter. You will therefore ask for the Fräulein Hilda, who will obtain for you her father's signature. I shall not enter the castle myself. It is true that, if anything should delay our homecoming, Colonel Granby will shortly be viewing the world from an unusual angle, but I am taking no risks. My friend here will accompany you into the house. He will see that you carry out your instructions and he will kill you without hesitation if he should notice any deviation from the programme. That is his peculiar virtue. He will obey my orders quite automatically and without any regard whatever for the consequences."

He paused and looked at me a moment.

"Is that clear?"

For answer I walked to the car and got into the seat beside the wheel. Wyndham followed. The car was a big Maybach with multiple gears. Wyndham drove at great speed and we shortly came within view of Königstal.

Wyndham turned without hesitation into the

drive and brought the car to a standstill at the foot of the steps.

"I give you ten minutes," he said.

My impassive companion had already alighted and was standing beside the car. I had noticed, on looking from time to time in the driving mirror, that during our journey he had not once moved or turned his head.

"Gottfried," said Wyndham sharply.

The man's eyes shifted quickly to Wyndham's face.

"Remember your orders. You are not to lose sight of this gentleman. He will ask to see the Fräulein von Esseling. She will obtain the order and hand it to Mr. Briercliffe. He will then join me here immediately. Should you observe the slightest hesitation or irregularity . . ."

"I am to kill him, is it not?" said the man.

Wyndham nodded.

I climbed the steps and the man in the bowler hat moved mechanically beside me. His eyes never left my face as I rang the bell and stated my business to the footman who came to the door.

We followed him into the library. The Fräulein von Esseling, he informed us, was in attendance upon his Excellency the Graf. She should be informed of my arrival.



The footman departed and my satellite took up a position beside the door. I stood myself by the window, from which I could see Wyndham waiting in the car below. I noticed a thin stream of vapour coming from the exhaust—a warning that my time would be short. He hadn't even switched off his engine.

I turned quickly and found Hilda.

"Ronald," she said, "I *knew* you would come," and gave me both her hands.

Then, seeing the man at the door, she drew back and looked at me with a question in her eyes. The mute figure had not stirred, but stood stiffly at attention, his eyes fixed upon me, glazing and pale.

I still held her by the hand and with my free arm gestured at the window. She looked down and saw Wyndham. I felt her grow rigid and knew that she was full of amazement and dark fear.

"Hilda," I said, and in that moment, faced with distress, I forgot everything—my mission, the implacable observer at the door. I do not know how it happened, but she was in my arms and I strained her towards me trying to still the trembling of her body.

"Darling," I stammered, "I have often wondered who I should tell you. You must

have known it always. I have loved you from the first moment that I saw you. I never thought to tell you like this—with *his* shadow across our meeting."

I looked from the window, down at Wyndham, as I spoke.

She had turned her face to me, forgetting, as I had, the man at the door and even, perhaps, for a moment, him at the wheel below.

Thus it was, with the eyes of a madman upon us and in peril of death, that we kissed for the first time.

Something stirred, as it seemed at an infinite distance. A husky voice called us back to the world.

"The message," it said.

I turned. The man in black had stepped forward. He was licking his lips.

"Do not again forget that I am here," he added.

"Ronald, my dear, what does it mean?"

I told her quickly and clearly of the pass to which we had come.

She listened in silence. There was no time for astonishment or doubt. When I had come to an end, after one glance at the waiting car, she went surprisingly to the heart of my trouble.

"Do not blame yourself, Ronald. You could not allow your friend to suffer."

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Then she added quickly : " I will get what you want."

" How is your father ? " I asked.

" Still very weak. Wait for me here a moment."

She hurried from the room. From outside came the sound of a motor horn; three musical notes. Wyndham was getting impatient. A moment later Hilda appeared again with a scrap of paper in her hand.

" Go now, my dear," she said, " or I shall keep you."

I looked at her forlornly a moment, kissed her and then moved blindly from the room and down the steps.

Five minutes later I again left Wyndham in the car and walked with the man in black through the beech woods to the mausoleum. I approached the officer in charge of the men who were guarding it and we were allowed to pass without any difficulty, the note from the Graf securing me instant admission. I reached up above the carven statue of Death with his scythe and my fingers closed on the small capsule where Granby had put it behind the urn. Then I walked back with my living shadow through the beech wood to where Wyndham waited in the car.

The sunshine poured through the leaves and the cool murmur of the Isar was sweet upon the ear.



SOME twenty minutes later I stood in the great hall of the castle where Wyndham was king, under the tapestry of Lazarus. The fair Wyndham, his hand above his head, leaned along the glass of the window, presenting a sharp contrast with the Mighty Magistro, who stood over against the door, his dark beard gleaming in the noonday sun, his eyes fixed brightly upon the capsule in his hand.

A bell rang somewhere and was answered by two men wearing the now familiar black shirt and leather breeches. Wyndham spoke sharply to them and they placed themselves one on each side of me, their faces wooden and expressionless, their limbs and bodies, perhaps their very souls, automatically obedient to the man who stood by the window.

They tapped me on the shoulder.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"To your friend in the tower," said the man in front.

We ascended in silence the winding stairs, my heart beating fast as we approached the door of the bare room with the pulley and the chain.

But we passed that house of pain and climbed higher, to the room above. Before we reached it, I found myself in the open air, skirting a little *chemin de ronde* running outside the main mass of the tower and protected by crenellated battlements. It was here that in mediæval days the sentry had paced or the watchman of the tower gazed out across the fair Bavarian countryside to the walls of Munich, twenty miles away.

Another black-shirted, leather-breeched fellow was pacing slowly round the tower. He held in his hand an automatic pistol such as I had often seen in gangster films, with a round drum, capable, I think, of firing twenty or thirty shots. I had never beheld one before in real life.

My guards saluted. The man with the automatic said nothing, but pushed open a small door. His face was blank as I moved past him.

The door shut with a hollow thud behind me.

The room in which I found myself was at the very top of the tower and even more mediæval in its primitive furnishings than the one immediately below. It had three or four stone embrasures in the wall which gave on to the *chemin de ronde* and was quite bare, except for two wooden stools.

"Well, young fellow-me-lad," came a familiar

voice, "what have *you* been doing with yourself?"

On one of the stools Granby was seated. I sat down upon the other.

"I have had to do with Wyndham," I said.

A shadow fell across my face. It was cast by the sentry pacing monotonously about the *chemin de ronde*.

"So I gather," said Granby, his eyes very bright and his mouth grim. "He took you away in a motor-car if I'm not mistaken."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

For a moment I thought he had noticed a speck of oil or something on my shoes.

"I had it from the fellow outside," answered Granby. "He's by way of being a friend of mine."

"To the mausoleum, I suppose," he added abruptly, and his tone had just that note in it which I had once been trained to expect and to endure from my adjutant or commanding officer when things had gone very wrong indeed.

I nodded weakly.

"From which I infer," continued Granby, and his voice rose oddly, so that he might have been heard at some considerable distance, "that Ruggiero is now bringing his mighty mind to



bear upon the message you have so obligingly put into his hands."

He was taking it badly.

"Granby," I said, "you don't understand. If I hadn't done as Wyndham asked . . ."

I paused.

"I should have perished horribly. Is that what you are trying to say?"

Granby's eyes were blazing. He got to his feet and his stool went flying with the impetus of his movement. He came and stood right over me. He is a small man, spare, light, all steel and muscle, but in a rage he is transformed. He seemed positively to swell, to tower. And his voice was shrill with passion.

"Is that how you understand your duty?"

"It was not myself they threatened."

But Granby would not listen.

"You wanted to save my wretched skin. Haven't you grasped the first principle of our Service? What are we all but numbers? If one of us goes out, he goes. Did you think I would ever myself have consented to such a bargain?"

Mechanically I noted that in one of the embrasures the sentry was standing. Granby's voice echoed loudly in that quiet stone place as he stood over me. He bent down and, for

one dreadful moment, I thought he was going to strike me. His mouth was within six inches of my ear.

"Play up, old boy," it hissed surprisingly.

I looked at him in astonishment.

"Chap outside," whispered Granby. "Explain later."

"Please understand," he bellowed, suddenly raising his voice again, "that you're a blot on the Service and, by George, if ever I get out of here, I will have you slung out of it neck and crop. Meanwhile, perhaps you'll tell me exactly what happened between you and your new confederates.

"Crawl to me now, old boy," he whispered, dropping his voice with a bewildering suddenness.

"It was like this," I began a little lamely.

"Stand to attention when you speak to me," he roared.

"Sir!" I exclaimed, springing up from my stool.

"Now report to me properly."

"At 10.20," I began in my best official manner, "I was sent for by Mr. Wyndham. He informed me, after some conversation, that the message found upon you was not genuine and that it was necessary for him to have the real one without

loss of time. He intimated that, in the event of my failing to comply with his request, he would hang Colonel Granby feet uppermost until death put an end to his sufferings."

I paused.

"Put an end to his sufferings," Granby barked impatiently. "What next?"

"I was under the impression, rightly or wrongly, that Colonel Granby would not wish that suggestion to be carried out."

From the corner of my eye I saw that the black-shirted sentry was listening with open ears at the embrasure.

"You had no right to assume anything of the kind," Granby stormed. "I am quite prepared to hang feet uppermost if my duty requires me to assume such a position.

"Good man," he added, dropping to a whisper, "keep it up. Say something disrespectful—so that I can smack your face."

"It is not a pleasant death," I pleaded. "There you remain . . . for hours . . . like a sheep's carcase."

Granby's open palm on my cheek sounded like a pistol shot.

"Enough, sir," he roared. "Your conduct shall be reported to headquarters and I shall not omit to mention that you had the insolence to



compare your superior officer to a sheep's carcase.

"Good boy," he added in an undertone. "Sheep's carcase was good. Keep it up . . . keep it up."

At that moment, however, a head was thrust through the embrasure and a voice broke in upon us, haltingly, in English.

"Brave men," it said, "brave men. But the Colonel does wrong to strike his colleague."

Granby wheeled about and faced the sentry.

"Mind your own business," he snapped. "This is my affair."

The face of the sentry was white and his eyes fathomless. His mouth trembled foolishly.

"Brave men," he repeated. "I have seen the room downstairs. It is terrible . . . terrible. The young man has saved us all. . . . For I have my orders . . . terrible orders. . . . He does not bluff you, the Herr Wyndham."

What sort of man was this? His eyes, in the strong light, were glazed. Granby looked at him more kindly, almost with compassion.

"You were to have been my executioner, is it not so?" he said sternly.

The man flinched and his lips quivered.

"My orders," he repeated.

"You will have orders still more terrible,

will you not?" continued Granby. "But you will not hesitate. For you have also your reward."

The man's eyes gleamed a moment and he passed his tongue across his lips.

"It is forbidden to speak of that," he said.

Then abruptly his head disappeared from the embrasure and he began to tramp monotonously round the *chemin de ronde*.

Granby moved to the centre of the room with his stool.

"I have done some useful work on that fellow," he whispered, sitting down opposite me. "Another push and I shall have him eating out of my hand. It may come in useful later."

"What does it all mean?" I whispered back. "He seems to be quite mad."

"This is a rum house," said Granby. "I haven't yet got the hang of it, but it's decidedly rum. Now tell me quickly. Ruggiero has the message?"

I nodded.

"Then why are they keeping us here? What is the next move?"

"Wyndham said he might need your help as an interpreter."

"That is only too likely. The message can

only be a link in the chain, and I shall be expected to supply the others."

"And then?"

"Then," said Granby, "the pleasant persuasions of our friends below will probably be renewed."

We spent the rest of the morning, desultory and low-voiced, talking over the position. What had Françoise discovered during her period of service in the Sigma Works? What information, if any, had she passed to Monnier? Why had Monnier not posted his message to Granby in the ordinary way? How had Françoise met her death? Why were our enemies so anxious to ascertain what the message contained? Would the message, if secured and interpreted, enlighten us as to the activities of du Bertrand and his organisation, or would it merely point us to a further clue? Clearly Françoise had discovered something of vital importance, so that Monnier, having this key to the mystery, had chosen to come himself to Munich, perhaps to ensure its safe delivery or, having lost his partner, to obtain further help and instructions. Monnier, moreover, must have realised, Françoise having been somehow unmasked and having paid the penalty with her life, that he himself was in peril and could be of no further service in Rheinau.



We waited a full hour before our midday meal appeared, but, shortly after that interlude, there came a sound of footsteps outside, followed by a jangle of keys and the door opened. One of our late conductors appeared.

"Down below," he said briefly.

We rose from our stools and followed him down the winding stairs, emerging into the great hall and so through the baize door to the laboratory where I had talked with Wyndham earlier that same morning. The bench for experiments was in place, bearing upon it the retorts, glasses and beakers which I had before observed. Amid the apparatus I noticed a large glass flask, ending in a short nozzle, the bottom covered with silver flakes. One of the Bunsen burners was alight and its thin, blue flame was reflected eerily in the shining surface of the wall. The room was rather warm, although the long windows stood open. Facing one of them was the Mighty Magistro. He had changed his clothes for a suit of white ducks, owing presumably to the weather, and his beard curled down over his white coat in ordered and scented profusion. The door slid to behind us. I heard a footstep, half-turned my head and perceived Wyndham. What was to happen now?

There was complete silence. Granby seated

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himself on one of the modern canvas and steel tubular chairs. Waiting for our enemies to speak, I again surveyed the room.

The windows gave upon the courtyard of the old Schloss. It was peaceful and September hot. Far away at one end of it I heard the lazy clucking of fowls. What was the meaning of it all? We had descended from a mediæval chamber, guarded by an automaton, and walked into a modern fantasy. We had tramped through the centuries, from Cressy to the post-war world, and I felt that in our passage we had left Wyndham far behind. He should, by rights, have worn the fur-trimmed, brocaded coat of a Medici, or the striped silk hose of Gian Galeazzo Visconti.

“Colonel Granby,” said Ruggiero, breaking the silence suddenly, “we require your further assistance.”

Granby made no answer.

“I have studied your cypher carefully,” pursued the Mighty One—something flashed between his fingers and as he moved I perceived that he was holding a large magnifying glass—“but so far it has failed to respond. The art of cyphering goes back to time immemorial. It was practised, I have reason to believe, by the early Egyptian priests, who painted messages from their gods in words that none could read upon the walls of



caves and temples. The Phœnicians were no strangers to the art and the maze of King Minos is thought by some scholars to have been but an elaborate concealment of the secrets of the Cretan faith."

"Ruggiero," protested Wyndham.

The Mighty Magistro raised a hand.

"One moment," he said. "I do not propose to trace the art of cyphering throughout the centuries. Let it suffice that I am able to read some hundred and seventy-four varieties."

"But not, it seems, the hundred and seventy-fifth," put in Granby.

Ruggiero shrugged his shoulders.

"I cannot decipher this message," he said, "and I, therefore, conclude that it is not really in cypher at all. It is a plain message and yet it remains mysterious. Since, however, it was sent to you, I venture to hope that to you it will be clear."

He spread out his hands as he spoke. In one, as I have said, was a magnifying glass and in the other a thin slip of silk-woven cigarette paper, the substance on which most of our messages in the Service are written.

"I feel sure you will help us, Colonel Granby," put in Wyndham.

Granby had risen from his chair and was



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moving about the room. I saw his glance rest for a moment on the bench where the experiment was in progress. Wyndham had moved from the door and was bending over the apparatus. Granby turned to face him.

"On what compulsion?" he said coldly.

"Just this," answered Wyndham quietly, without looking up from his task. "I propose to reverse the procedure of this morning. Mr. Briercliffe procured this message for us in order that you might be spared a fate which he has doubtless described to you in extenuation of his conduct in consenting to be of service to us. One good turn deserves another. You will now read the message for us so that Mr. Briercliffe shall not be put in precisely the same position."

Granby looked at him unflinchingly, his face very stern and cold. For myself, I had that feeling one gets on Dover pier when the Channel is grey and streaked with white horses. I knew Granby's principles. He was made of sterner stuff than I. Had he not said that in the Service a man was nothing but a number? It looked mightily as though my own would shortly be up.

"You would scarcely expect me to decide so grave a matter immediately?" he said.

"On the contrary," put in Ruggiero from the window. "We expect you to decide it here and now. I give you two minutes in which to make up your mind."

He produced from his waistcoat pocket a slim gold watch. It seemed to my excited senses that I could hear the ticking of that watch as though it were a grandfather clock, and the exact picture of the room is engraved deeply upon my memory: Wyndham cool and lean, with his fair hair and his strangely beautiful face, standing by the bench seemingly absorbed in his experiment; Ruggiero, as tall but twice as broad, standing by the window; the room itself, with its fantastic steel furniture and its glass and malachite furnishings; outside, the quiet courtyard of the Schloss, across which I could see moving slowly a yellow provision cart.

At Granby I did not dare to look.

Ruggiero shut his watch with a snap.

"Time's up," he said.

Granby turned sharply on his heel. I moved towards him.

"No foolery, please, Colonel. Get away from that window."

Ruggiero, for once, was short and sharp. His beard jutted; his eyes were cool and dangerous.

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Granby stepped back to the table on which the experiment was progressing.

"Give me the message," he said.

Ruggiero glanced at Wyndham.

"Come," said Granby impatiently, "you cannot expect me to read the message from here, can you? Not even if Ruggiero were to give me his magnifying glass."

Wyndham laughed suddenly.

"Give him the message," he said. "It is useless to us until he reads it."

Granby held out his right hand, leaning back against the edge of the bench, and Ruggiero advanced from the window holding out the thin slip of paper. Granby took it with his right hand. He gazed at it, his brow puckered.

"You will perceive," said Ruggiero, "there is a musical phrase followed by a letter and numbers."

"No use to me," said Granby. "I couldn't recognise 'God Save the King' if it were printed larger than life."

"Come," said Wyndham. "The music is a blind. You know perfectly well what the message means."

"Give me the glass," said Granby, holding out his hand absently, his eye on the minute script of the message.



Ruggiero handed him the magnifying glass. Granby took it, but held it clumsily so that it flashed in the sunlight as he tried to focus it.

"Careful," said Ruggiero warningly. "That is also a burning-glass. You'll set the paper alight if you don't look out."

"That," responded Granby, "would be a pity; for we are all equally interested in what poor Monnier had to say."

"Come over here, Ronald, and give me a hand," he added, and again the glass flashed in his hand, a bright ray of light dancing over the wall and flickering over the bench where Wyndham still reclined.

I was half-way across to him when suddenly his head went back.

"Get behind me," he said, in tones that cracked like a whip.

At the same instant there came a blinding flash and a staggering report, as though a shell had burst.

"To the window, Ronald," he cried.

There was a crash behind us and a shout from Wyndham as, following Granby, who had already jumped, I sprang for liberty—just missing as I fell, the yellow cart which I had seen a few moments ago traversing the courtyard.

WE dashed behind the cart and thence to the far side of it so as to put it between ourselves and Wyndham. Granby then leaped to the driver's seat. The driver, a tow-headed youth with a cigarette hanging from his lower lip, holding slack reins, registered slow astonishment. It evidently took him time to go to the heart of things.

There came another crack from the window as I scrambled desperately to get on board. The bullet went wide and the horse suddenly bolted with a scream as Wyndham's shot flicked it on the rump. I found myself sprawling across the seat, my face half-buried in a miscellaneous collection of provisions. There was, among other things, a crate of beer bottles, and I had time to notice a bag of flour which had burst under my weight as I struggled to sit up.

Granby was beside the driver. The horse was bolting and the cart rocked and swayed.

"Keep quiet," Granby was saying—rather unnecessarily, for the lad was beyond speech. "Remember that I am a bandit of the worst description."

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Whereupon he stuffed a note into the yokel's palm, who transferred it dreamily to his pocket.

Granby in the meantime had caught up the reins. We were careering madly down the narrow road which led from the castle, and at the first hair-pin bend we should inevitably have been upset had not our horse skidded and almost fallen, so that Granby was enabled to recover control.

"They will follow in a car," I said.

"They will," he answered.

"There are some bottles of beer behind," I continued.

"Ronald," said Granby, "there are few occasions in life when a reference to beer is out of place. This is one of them."

He was still tugging at the galloping horse, assisted not unskilfully by the horse's driver, who had at last begun to grasp the fact that the animal was trying to run away.

"But we might break the bottles on the road," I suggested.

"Good lad," answered Granby.

I crawled over the back of the seat, reached for the bottles, and dropped them one by one from the tailboard.



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I had once read a story of a Russian family pursued in their sledge by a pack of wolves, and how the father threw his children overboard one by one to delay pursuit. I knew now how the poor man must have felt.

We had safely negotiated two more bends in the road when my eye lighted on a hawk which swooped suddenly upwards. I followed the flight of the bird and caught sight, on the upper part of the road down which we had come, of the long body of the Maybach.

"Here they come," I said and again looked back.

The long car, at the speed it was making, would overtake us in a couple of minutes. Wyndham, I noted, was at the wheel and a couple of men in shirt-sleeves were in the dicky. Down it swept, like the Assyrian, over our poor barrier of broken glass.

"Stand by to abandon ship," said Granby, as our cart staggered and lurched into the main road.

Our enemies were about fifty yards behind us as we swung round with a great clatter of hoofs and creaking of wheels. Recapture seemed inevitable. Yet at that supreme moment we achieved salvation.

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*In Paradisum perducant te angeli*—the sad chant, with its strong promise of another world, struck on my ears. We had come upon a procession which was moving slowly down the road. The head of it had reached the spot where the little side road ran into the main road just as we ourselves had arrived. In front was a large hearse drawn by two sable horses. Immediately behind the hearse were two men and a woman, in heavy black, the woman veiled; behind them a string of villagers walking four abreast, mostly men with their hats in their hands.

Without an instant's hesitation Granby joined the end of the procession, slipping in under the lee of three village gendarmes in full uniform. So we walked, sadly and slowly, while, ahead of us, perhaps twenty yards, bobbed the figure of the village priest, with his black cope, and above our heads swayed a brazen cross carried in the hands of a small boy with squeaking boots.

The Maybach had drawn alongside as if to pass the procession, but the act was strongly resented by an angry little man, whose face of solemn woe became abruptly sanguine with wrath as he observed this act of disrespect. Wyndham, therefore, stopped the car half-way down the line and waited. I looked up at him as we went by.



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He had removed his hat and, as I looked up, was composing his features to a becoming reverence. But there was a smile at the corners of his mouth as our eyes met. He made no effort to molest or detain us, but bowed slightly over the wheel as we passed.

So, in this ordered fashion, did we, after ten minutes, reach a churchyard. There we stood while the body was laid to rest and there we listened to the speech of the village mayor on the virtues of the deceased, a prosperous farmer who had yet contrived to be a good man and to whose benefactions many a poor person in the village of Partenkirche owed more than a little.

For the first time since our escape, standing in the sunshine close to the gendarmes, I was able to take a good look at my partner. His coat was in ribbons and appeared to have been scorched, while his shirt showed through a gap in his trousers.

The speeches drew to a close and Granby clutched me by the arm.

The churchyard was in a little clearing in the woods, fenced by a low hedge, through which we slipped into the shade of great trees beyond.

"*Festina lente*," said Granby as we moved, "or, in other words, we will now make haste with



deliberation. For the moment the pursuit is baffled."

"Why have they lost sight of us?" I wondered.

"They could hardly attack us before a crowd of witnesses, including three full-grown units of the local police. Wyndham knew that as long as he kept us in view we should cling for company to the crowd. We shall now make the most of our opportunity and my device, let me tell you, is to get to Königstal as the crow flies."

"Meanwhile," said I, as we went almost at a run through the pleasant woods, "I should like to know exactly what happened just now when we jumped for the window. That explosion . . . how did you manage it?"

"Know any chemistry?"

"I was far too well brought up."

"I, on the contrary, learned at school quite a number of things which no young gentleman ought to know. That glass jar or flask on the bench in Wyndham's laboratory contained hydrogen."

"Shame," I murmured.

"Or rather," continued Granby, "it contained the composites of hydrogen: to wit, zinc filings and hydrochloric acid."

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"Really, Granby, must we continue this conversation?"

"When a flask," persisted Granby, "is filled entirely with hydrogen the gas given off burns with a light blue flame. If, however, you apply heat before the flask is entirely filled with the gas, that is to say, while air is still present in the flask, there is a brisk explosion."

"So that," I said, "was the purpose of your by-play with the burning-glass?"

"You may go to the top of the class."

"But you might have blown us all up?"

Granby smiled grimly.

"It was possible. I would remind you, however, that the alternative was to see you strung up . . . like a sheep's carcase—your phrase, I think—until death put an end to your sufferings. Colonial papers, please copy. All things considered, I think I may claim to have acted for the best. We're in luck, Ronald, my boy."

I looked at him sourly.

"Our luck," I agreed, "is marvellous. I came to Bavaria for a quiet holiday. What I've had so far is a railway smash, a funeral, two corpses, a chemical explosion and now a chief with no backside to his breeches."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Granby, placing his

hand on the affected part. "Is it as bad as that?"

"Pretty nearly," I assured him.

"My wardrobe is in Munich," he mourned.

"Sorry. I'm afraid that I'm a bit long in the leg for you," I answered.

Granby dislikes attention being called to his moderate stature. He would be quite capable, in fact, of borrowing my trousers, shutting his eyes to the result, merely in order to show that he could wear them. But I was feeling far from merciful.

"Concerning the message," said Granby.

"I haven't seen it yet," I pointed out.

"Ruggiero described it accurately enough—a musical phrase, followed by a letter and two numbers. Are you a musician?"

"No."

"But you must know something about it. Don't they have A's and B's and C's in music? We might make sense of it that way."

"Such an obvious solution as that," I said unkindly, "would certainly have occurred to the Mighty One."

He paused suddenly and pointed to a clearing in the beech trees.

"There," he said, "is Königstal."



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Perhaps half a mile away, across the turf, stood the old Schloss. Very lovely it looked in the sunlight of the early afternoon, with a smother of late autumnal flowers at the foot of its grey walls. We slipped quickly through the wood and across the park, and in ten minutes found ourselves safely at the door. It was opened by a servant of the Graf, but Hilda was in the hall. When she saw us, she turned white, then red and white again.

She ran to us and held out both her hands.

"Oh, my dears," she said, "my dears. At least you are safe."

She broke off with a little laugh.

"But why is Colonel Granby sidling through the hall like a crab?"

"It's his trousers," I explained. "He has had an accident."

"To change the subject, Fräulein Hilda," said Granby hastily, "do you think you could rustle us a drink?"

"The hunter home from the hill," said Hilda. "May I suggest some Amontillado?"

"You may," said Granby.

She rang the bell and the butler received his instructions, to reappear a moment later with the sherry and glasses.

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Granby in the meantime had seated himself in a large arm-chair. The thin silk-woven piece of paper was in his hands.

"Now, tell me about it," said Hilda.

"I'm sorry," said Granby; "it is a long story and will have to wait. Suffice it that Ronald is safe and sound. So, too, am I—except for the trifling damage to which attention was rather tactlessly directed a moment ago. We need your advice. What are we to make of that?"

He handed her the little scrap of paper as he spoke.

Hilda and I bent over it together. This is what we read:<sup>1</sup>



"The music is simple enough," said Hilda at last.

"It conveys nothing whatever to me," I protested.

"You really ought to know it," she responded severely. "It's the love call from *Tristan*."

<sup>1</sup> I have had the music decently transcribed. The spider scrawl of Françoise was legible only to the expert.

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"Tell me, Ronald," put in Granby. "What exactly did poor Monnier say to you before he died?"

I supped my sherry and thought. Then I put the glass down. Rather abruptly I said:

"After telling me that Françoise was dead he uttered a phrase which appeared to be quite irrelevant."

"What were his words?" inquired Granby sharply.

"*In the library*," I answered.

Granby jumped up from his chair.

"You were shown over the Sigma factory," he said. "Did it include a library?"

"By George!" I exclaimed.

"It *did* include a library," said Granby. "The message now begins to be legible. We have *Tristan* followed by something that looks very much like a shelf number. Françoise may have been hard pressed. She slipped her message into a book, hoping to recover it later. She was unable to do so, however, and could only pass on to Monnier a clue to its whereabouts. Monnier was unable to use the clue and decided to pass it on to me."

"You think of everything," said Hilda.

There was a pause.



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"This means," I ventured at last, "that one of us must go to Rheinau. Do we cast lots?"

"The lot," said Granby, "has fallen. I'm sorry, old boy, but I have other fish to fry. Ever heard of the clinic of Dr. Axius?" he continued, turning to Hilda.

Hilda nodded.

"It's an old house," she said, "that used to belong to the von Emmerichs. They sold it some time ago. It is commonly supposed to be a home of rest. But nobody ever goes near it. It now seems that Dr. Axius . . ."

". . . is our old friend Francis Wyndham," concluded Granby. "And his patients are odd, extremely odd. I propose to become one of them."

There was another and a longer pause.

"Then Ronald," said Hilda at last, "must go back to Rheinau?"

Granby nodded.

"To take the place of X.42," he added.

"But who," asked Hilda, "is to take the place of Françoise?"

"That will be more troublesome," replied Granby. "I must wire to headquarters. Prunella might do. She is in Paris at the

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moment, I think. Have we a telegraph form?"

Hilda pointed to an old Empire desk in the corner and Granby rose briskly to his feet, forgetting his torn raiment.

"It will be quicker," said Hilda, "if we send the wire from Munich."

"I suppose so," said Granby, scribbling rapidly.

"I will drive Ronald to Munich and take in the wire at the same time," said Hilda quietly.

An hour later I was once more travelling alone in a train bound for Strassburg and my heart was bitter.

## CHAPTER XV. I AM SADDLED WITH A SISTER

MY estate was not a happy one. To start with I was in a German third-class carriage, and to travel third class in Germany is not precisely the height of comfort. The compartment was crowded and the men, as is the practice with third-class travellers in Germany, had removed

their boots. Travelling as a respectable member of the working classes, and not wishing to seem peculiar, I did likewise. I was wearing the outfit of one of the retainers of the Graf—rough leather breeches ending in short leggings, a thick shirt and a still thicker dark brown coat. I was, in fact, one of the hempen homespun and felt profoundly uncomfortable and ill at ease. My fellow-travellers took me for a surly fellow, until I explained gruffly that I was suffering from toothache, whereupon they became sympathetic. One of them even went so far as to offer me a nip of some not unpleasant though sweetish brandy. This I accepted and, holding my hand to my face, sat back in the jolting carriage, pondering the whole fantastic series of events which had intruded so untimely upon my summer leave.

The train jolted uneasily through the night and I had the misfortune to be sitting over a wheel, which made sleep impossible. Vivid pictures of my hurried send-off from Munich passed through my mind : a fat little man at police headquarters with a red head and round spectacles, most polite, and much given to a clicking of the heels, chief of the secret police in Bavaria ; the ticker machine clicking away in a corner of his office under the



eye of a cadaverous secretary, checking station reports; the red bluff face of a sergeant who had broken in on our conference to announce yet another railway accident, this time at Cüstrin in Prussia; most of all, the face of Hilda as she had said good-bye to me on the steps of the police office. She had waved her hand, let in her clutch and swung her machine round with almost brutal violence, her eyes holding the brightness of the sky after rain.

I dismounted at Stuttgart in the small hours of the morning, and made my way, according to orders, to a small barber's shop not far from the station. They had telephoned from Munich during the night about me and all was in readiness, including my instructions.

On reaching Rheinau I was to go slightly up in the social scale, for Granby, through the Munich secret police, had arranged that, after Stuttgart, I was to assume the person, habits, garments and papers of one Hans Burgener, a native of Alsace, who spoke French with a strong German accent, was extremely patriotic and practised the arts of a motor mechanic. There was a strange anomaly in the use we made that day and on subsequent days of the German secret police. During the war they had hounded Granby remorselessly and

unsuccessfully from pillar to post and, as a result of their cunning and skill, many of our young men had lost their lives. Now they were wholly at his service, eager and proud to put themselves entirely at the disposal of their former enemy.

As Hans Burgener I was to seek service with Burkhardt, the French garage proprietor at Rheinau. There I was to spend my day dismantling motor-cars, cleaning carburettors, attending to big ends and doing the miscellaneous jobs of a small garage, while I waited for a summons, which was to take the form of a picture postcard, displaying the fussy magnificence of the Paris Opera House. It would be a chatty card, written in French, from my sister, one Gertrude, who was in Paris for the first time, seeing the sights. When I received it I was to go at once to the station and meet Gertrude, who would, as Granby hoped, be Prunella, one of our brighter women agents, whom as yet I did not know. She would be wearing a blue coat and skirt with a small posy of carnations. I was to take her to the rooms which I should occupy in the place of the late Henri Monnier and there we should arrange our method of communication. For Prunella was to enter the factory, though how



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she was to manage it I did not know. That was no part of my business, but would be arranged in Paris. Then I should have to await her reports, above all for the message which she would find hidden in the library.

So it had been arranged.

I pocketed the papers of Hans Burgener, had a couple of hours' sleep and, fortified with breakfast, entered yet another third-class carriage and duly arrived at Strassburg at about midday. Here I found a motor omnibus which ran me down to Rheinau after I had spent an hour wandering round Strassburg Cathedral and trying, I fear without success, to set my mind at rest. I was bewildered and in the dark. Overshadowing my personal predicament, which was sufficiently disturbing, was a heavy sense of larger issues, of an immense general disaster somewhere impending. I was one of ten million pebbles poised on the edge of a steep descent. Presently the moment would come, as inevitably as the rising of the sun, when the pebbles would begin to slip with ever-increasing velocity down to destruction. Yet in reaction from all this was an exultation of mind and heart which nothing could suppress. It came upon me in the midst of my forebodings, sharp and keen. For I was in love,



overwhelmingly in love, and my love suddenly blazed up and blinded me to all the rest. I went through the motions of my profession, submitted to having my hair cut and my eyebrows altered by the little German barber like a man in a dream. Nor did life seem any more real to me when I knocked at the door of Monsieur Burkhardt's garage in the straggling township of Rheinau.

I cannot say that Monsieur Burkhardt was pleased to see me. He appeared to be concerned mainly with placating a comfortable wife, whom he smothered under every form of endearment whenever they met, which was every five minutes. Two days in his workshop revealed to me his ruling passions: the amassing of as much money as he could and a determination to run the fewest possible risks. He regarded my sojourn with him, as he had doubtless regarded that of Henri Monnier, with a mixture of avarice and suspicion. Yet it would be a mistake to call him a bad fellow. He was loyal to his paymasters and he was efficient. Also he had a craftsman's pleasure in his work, and in my first forty-eight hours in his shop I learned more about the insides of engines than I ever did before or ever shall. He made the fewest possible references to my real job,

beyond informing me that there were, so far as he knew, no other agents either of the British or French service in Rheinau. I fancy that Monsieur Burkhardt was at considerable pains to keep the secret side of his life unknown to the rest of the world, including his wife—a procedure which doubtless enabled him to have a second and extremely private banking account.

Meanwhile Ronald Briercliffe, Hans Burgener to outward seeming, greasy and covered with oil, worked more or less cheerfully upon his derelicts, with no other apparent object in life, from six o'clock in the morning until the shades of evening.

It was the morning of the third day when at last I received Granby's message—a telegram announcing the hour at which the motor bus arrived at Rheinau. Where then was the post-card from Paris? Had something gone wrong? The time for action, at any rate, had come. Burkhardt informed me that all the arrangements had already been made. Prunella, if it were she, would lodge that night and perhaps the following with his wife's sister. I was to meet the bus and conduct my sister to her lodging.

As I burned the telegram I felt a slight glow



of satisfaction. Now, at least, I should get on with the job and, truth to tell, during those two days of waiting it had seemed as though life stood still, so thoroughly had I become broken to a career of headlong vicissitudes.

Burkhardt had not allowed me to go near the Sigma Works, urging that it would serve no useful purpose till the time came. I recognised the good sense of his persuasion. In the Service nothing is more discouraged than the seeking of information without a definite purpose or adequate preparation. We are trained to keep quiet and not to worry till the moment comes. I will admit, however, that my mind was not upon sparking plugs or piston rings from the time that I received the telegram till I stood at last in the little square waiting for the arrival of the motor omnibus from Strassburg.

It came in sight presently down the dusty road, a bright yellow vehicle packed with peasant women and their baskets. As it drew up beside me I saw, with a slight quickening of the pulses, a slim figure in a blue coat and skirt, with a cheap leather bag in one hand and, in the other, one of those travelling baskets with a strap round it. Her back was towards me as she rose to descend from the bus.



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This, then, was "Prunella."

She descended from the omnibus and stood looking about her in the evening sunshine, her luggage in both hands and a carnation in her buttonhole. A string of lorries from the Sigma Works passed between us with much clatter of wheels. When they had gone by, the girl was still standing in the road. Then she started to cross the square. As she did so, my heart gave a great leap and stood in my throat. Walking towards me with a smile upon her face was Hilda von Esseling.

"Hilda!" I stammered, as she reached my side.

"Not Hilda, dear idiot," she said in a low tone, "but Gertrude. I am Gertrude Burgener and I am your sister. So you can give me a kiss."

I bent forward, but she turned her head.

"On the cheek, stupid," she said.

I kissed her warmly on both cheeks and then possessed myself of her luggage.

But, suddenly, my singing heart was mute. Then I mixed my metaphors and it sank like a stone. Why had she come to Rheinau?

"Hilda," I demanded urgently, "what does this mean?"

But Hilda, as she walked by my side down the dusty street, refused for the moment to explain. She insisted on telling me about her journey from Strassburg, speaking French with a heavy guttural accent, in which she showed herself to be amazingly proficient. There had been, it appeared, three old women and a priest in her carriage, not to speak of a commercial traveller of an enterprising disposition. She was not a bit tired; grandmother had supplied her well with food; she was looking forward to her work.

I was not sorry when we reached the house of Burkhardt's sister-in-law, a little villa on the outskirts of the town. The sister-in-law had evidently been warned and was ready to receive us, but I do not think she was in the secret. I waited in a trim parlour, while Hilda busied herself with her luggage and repaired what she described as the ravages of the journey, though personally I should not have noticed them.

"Listen, Ronald," she protested, as I kissed her again, not too brotherly. "This is no time for dalliance."

"The voice of Granby," I said in bitterness. "Before he was married he said it quite often to himself. Now he says it to the other fellows. I agree, however, in principle."

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"I think Colonel Granby is simply marvelous," she retorted.

"He has been much admired in his time," I admitted. "You will perhaps explain to me now why he has allowed you to come masquerading here to Rheinau."

"There was no one else," returned Hilda quietly. "Prunella was otherwise engaged."

"I see," I said. "So Granby prevailed upon *you*. I should have thought better of him."

"It was I that prevailed. Not easy, I assure you. I had no idea such a nice man could be so obstinate."

"But, Hilda dear . . ."

Hilda waved her hands at me.

"Please, Ronald. I really can't begin all over again. I persuaded Colonel Granby and I haven't any more persuasion left. Besides, it's too late. My name is Gertrude. I have even a number."

"Nonsense."

"X.94 at your service. I also have my instructions. I am to enter the factory to-morrow and watch my opportunity to visit the library. You will meet me in the evening as a dutiful brother and receive my report."



I was walking up and down the room in high wrath.

"What the devil does Granby mean by allowing you to come into this business?" I asked. "He has no earthly right."

"Look here, Ronald," said Hilda, putting a hand on my arm. "It is no use throwing these fits of indignation. Please understand, once for all, that I have no sympathy whatever with the poor weak woman complex. You are going to marry a creature of flesh and blood and not the perfect lady of your dreams."

She plumped herself down on my knee and ran a soothing hand through my hair.

"If I were a perfect lady," she went on, "I should not be sitting here. So you ought to be thankful."

"Well," I said ungraciously, "here you are and I suppose there's nothing to be done."

"You can at least show pleasure in my company."

Whereupon I decided to show pleasure, until Hilda, a little breathless, jumped down from my knee. Then my worries returned.

"How," I asked, "are you going to get into the factory? I won't have you making eyes at the foreman."

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"It isn't quite so simple as that," she responded.

"It isn't simple at all," I said. "I know something about the organisation of the place. Don't forget that I was shown round by du Bertrand's secretary. He explained that there was a long waiting list of people who wanted to get a job."

"I was on the list," said Hilda calmly.

She returned to my knee and leaned back in the crook of my arm.

"Johann Burgener," she continued, "has been a trusted employee of the factory for twenty years."

"Who is Johann Burgener?"

"Our father, darling. I am his daughter Gertrude."

"And the real Gertrude?"

"She has gone to the Riviera."

I put a hand to my head.

"This is getting too complicated for me," I protested.

"You'll get it quite clear in a minute," she assured me patiently. "Johann Burgener was one of the original Sigma employees before du Bertrand took over the works. He lives in Strassburg. His daughter has been on the waiting list

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for some years. I am taking her place. It was all arranged within a few hours of your leaving Munich. Colonel Granby is simply marvellous."

"You've said that before," I said peevishly.

"Simply marvellous!" she repeated firmly.

"He telephoned to Paris and put the position to General Rhémy. You remember General Rhémy?"

"I remember."

"General Rhémy telephoned to Strassburg and Gertrude on her way to the factory was quietly removed."

"Abducted?"

"With her own consent. She had no objection to taking a week's holiday at the expense of the French Secret Service at a good hotel. Gertrude, in fact, was most kind and helpful. She wrote for me three nice letters, to be posted in due course to her anxious father."

"*Our* father," I said.

Hilda nodded brightly.

"You are beginning to learn your piece," she said.

She dived into her bag as she spoke and produced three envelopes.

"I shall post them every alternate day while I am in the factory. They will keep our adopted



parent happy and unsuspecting. Colonel Granby, after fixing me up as Gertrude, then proceeded to fix you up as Hans. Colonel Granby is . . . .”

“ . . . simply marvellous,” I concluded. “He seems, in fact, to have successfully managed for us to walk during the next forty-eight hours among burning ploughshares.”

“Dancing on the razor’s edge,” said Hilda. “But we shan’t have to keep it up for long. Wyndham was going to hold you both at the clinic for seven days. That was two days ago and two from seven leaves five. The event for which they are preparing will take place within the next hundred and twenty hours or so.”

“Is Gertrude known in the factory?”

“We took good care, of course, to be quite sure that she was not.”

I began pacing the room in a reviving perturbation of spirit.

“Wouldn’t it have been simpler,” I asked, “with all these police about, to raid the factory, arrest the management and search the library under a good and proper warrant?”

“No,” said Hilda, “it wouldn’t. Du Bertrand is an ex-Minister of France. He still has

influence with a party which may even yet get control of the political machine. Do you see the French authorities, on almost no evidence at all, arresting Poincaré and searching his private premises, or the British Government descending like a wolf on the fold of Winston Churchill? That sort of thing is out of the question. No one has yet discovered anything that throws suspicion on the factory, except Françoise—and Françoise is dead.

“And now, my dear,” she concluded suddenly, “you will give your travel-worn sister a bite of supper and to-morrow morning you will deliver her punctually at eight o’clock at the factory gates.”

I took her to the one restaurant in Rheinau, where we ate a very tolerable meal, though Hilda insisted that I should not be extravagant. It did not become a motor mechanic to waste his substance on feeding a mere sister. We finished at a cinema, where we sat, not unhappily, gazing at Gina Manés.

And so to bed.

The next morning I was up betimes and drove Hilda, with the permission of Monsieur Burkhardt, the mile and a half to the factory in a shabby little Citroën. I left her at the gate

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among a group of half a dozen girls who were also awaiting admission. Then I turned back and did my best to forget all about her, while I dealt with the complicated ills of a differential.

I met her again when she came off shift. She was loud in her praises of the factory and would talk of nothing but its organisation. She had been put to the simplest work, her job being to wait upon a machine which automatically shredded tobacco. She hoped to visit the library on the next day. There would, she thought, be no kind of difficulty. The work for the women was very easy and, in their workshop, a loud-speaker gave lectures while they worked the machines. She had listened to an interesting exposition of the art of Michael Angelo.

"Rationalisation," I said bitterly. "They get more out of you that way. It's slavery intelligently organised."

"And very nice too," said Hilda.

When I met her again next day I saw at once that she looked a little less happy.

"Give me an *apéritif*," she said.

We sat down on the terrace of the little Café du Progrès.

"Ronald," she said, while the waiter bustled



## I SPOIL HER EVENING OUT

away to get vermouth, "I have been to the library. But the message isn't there. There is no such number in the catalogue."

She dived into her bag as she spoke and produced a little typewritten slip.

"I have got this instead," she went on, and handed me the paper.

"Monsieur du Bertrand," I read, "will see Mademoiselle Burgener at 8.45 to-morrow morning."

## CHAPTER XVI.

## I SPOIL HER EVENING OUT

I WILL not weary you with a record of the arguments that I used in my vain endeavour to dissuade Hilda from returning to the factory. I tried all things, from pleading to direct command. All were equally useless, as indeed I had known from the very first. Hilda was determined at all costs to finish the work to which she had set her hand. She assured me, moreover, that the director of the Sigma factory had a personal interview with every new-comer and that she had not, therefore, been singled out for

special treatment. Her audience would probably be merely formal.

She accordingly went off next morning to her work and I waited miserably through the day. Then, despite the protests of Burkhardt, I determined to meet her at the factory gates and borrowed his dusty little Citroën to do so. I sat in the late evening sunshine outside the flashing palace of industry, watching the workers stream out. To my left, some hundreds of yards away, gleamed the workshops, designed, I think, by Corbusier or one of his pupils, with their shining windows and their air of super-efficiency, surrounded by their high wall. Beyond stretched the neat village or town of the workers, with its red roofs and gardens and children playing on the grass, as yet unwithered by a touch of frost.

Beyond these, as I knew, was the house of the director himself, a white château on the slopes of a wooded hill. Who knew what strange treasons, stratagems and spoils were plotting beneath its steeply sloping grey roof?

A shift was coming off duty and I sat at the wheel gazing eagerly through the windscreen. It consisted of a troop of about fifty girls, nearly all young, wearing the clothes of their fancy, for they left their working uniforms in the factory.

## I SPOIL HER EVENING OUT

Nowhere among them could I see Hilda and, as the last of them went past, laughing with her fellows, I lingered on wretched and for the moment incapable of action. The blow had fallen. Hilda had not come out. I sat motionless, with the sweat streaming down my face. I was looking, not at the pleasant workshop, but at the face of one, Françoise, framed in yellow hair, with painted lips parted and eyes closed in death. The face changed and it was Hilda von Esseling that I saw.

I found myself standing upright in the car, so that, had any seen me, they must have thought me mad.

I waited miserably yet another half hour. Then, as she did not come, I backed the car, turned and drove blindly back to Rheinau.

What should I do? She must needs be helpless or in peril. What else could have kept her from the evening tryst? Was it, perhaps, too late to do anything effective? But that was a thought I did not dare to face.

Should I try to get into touch with Granby? But where was Granby now? Already posing, perhaps, as one of the patients of Dr. Axius. Any message that I might send to him would be received by whom? Most likely by the Graf



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von Esseling, lying sick. How would he receive a message that his daughter had vanished? Did he even know that she had come to Rheinau about this desperate business?

I must act alone.

It was now dark. I was still in my mechanic's overalls, washing the Citroën. Burkhardt had given me the job, I think out of kindness, for he could see how troubled I was. As I sprayed the hose this way and that a voice in French addressed me suddenly.

"Monsieur Burgener?" it said.

I turned sharply with the hose.

A girl with red hair, freckled and with a turned-up nose, was standing in front of me. I had never seen her before. How did she know my name? I straightened up slowly from the car and dropped the hose. The girl held a letter in her hand.

"You are M. Burgener?" she asked.

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

"Here is a note from your sister."

My heart gave a great leap. I put my hand out and took it. The girl stood by, as I fumbled with the envelope. I longed to tear it open, but could not trust myself to read it till she went away.

## I SPOIL HER EVENING OUT

I looked at her vaguely.

"You were going out with your sister to-night, were you not?" said the girl. "It is a pity she cannot come."

"How do you know she cannot come?" I asked.

"She told me when she gave me the note. It is not nice to be alone in the evening, Monsieur."

"No," I said stupidly, "I suppose not."

"It is difficult to amuse oneself—alone," she said, looking at me slyly.

"Thank you, Mademoiselle," I said. "Good-night."

The red-headed girl, with a shrug of her shoulders, moved away.

I broke open the note:

"MY DARLING HANS,

Monsieur du Bertrand has asked me to dinner to-night. It is, of course, a great honour and I have therefore hastened to accept his invitation. I am sorry about the cinema, but to-morrow night will do just as well, won't it? Be kind to my messenger. She is rather nice.

"Your loving sister,

"GERTRUDE."

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

*Dining with du Bertrand.* Françoise, perhaps, had dined with du Bertrand.

My mind was made up. I had waited too long, but now waiting was over and, although in my heart of hearts I feared disaster, yet the fact that I should no longer stay in Burkhardt's garage for news which did not come acted like a tonic. It was with an odd tranquillity of mind that I informed Burkhardt that I was going out that night and that I did not know when I should be back.

He looked at me queerly, but said nothing.

I decided to wear my overalls, for they were of dirty brown and less conspicuous than anything else in my wardrobe. I slipped a pistol into my pocket, for Granby and I had re-provided ourselves after our escape from Dr. Axis. Burkhardt, who was in my room, an attic with a sloping roof above his own, watched these proceedings with a detachment which was not unmingled with reprobation.

"You will give my house an ill name," he said. "Monnier lodged with me. Monnier is dead. Now it is you. If you also die—which is probable—I shall not escape suspicion."

"Don't worry, my friend"—I was putting on a pair of indiarubber-soled shoes as I spoke



—"I shall endeavour not to die, for your sake."

"Françoise is dead. Monnier is dead. Your sister, perhaps, is dead. You may die yourself this evening. All that will be bad for my house."

I asked him to cease these efforts to cheer me on my way and to tell me what he knew of the château of du Bertrand and its approaches.

That he was ready enough to do. I learned that it was a French country villa, built somewhere about the end of the eighteenth century. It had in front of it lawns and a small formal garden, overlooked by the windows of the principal rooms. Behind were apparently various dependencies, including some stables converted into a garage. The château stood in its own grounds and was surrounded by a stone wall of no very great height.

"Servants?" I inquired.

On that point Burkhardt was vague. Du Bertrand, though a rich man, had, it seemed, but few servants at the château. From this I judged him to be a man of simple tastes, which was in keeping with his character as far as I knew it.

I started at perhaps half-past seven in the

evening. I went on foot, for there seemed no point in taking the car. I set off briskly along the road under the autumnal stars. My plan was simple. I must enter the château. If Hilda, dining alone with du Bertrand, was proving equal to the situation, I should confine myself to watching the proceedings. If, on the contrary, she should need my help . . . Instinctively I slipped a hand into my pocket.

In my mind ran a hideous syllogism. Françoise had dined with du Bertrand. Françoise was dead. Hilda also was dining with du Bertrand.

A walk of three-quarters of an hour brought me to the stone wall surrounding the park. Here, perhaps, was need for caution and I made sure that I had everything in readiness—my pistol, an electric torch and the sheath-knife which Burkhardt had pressed upon me to make it possible for me to open windows. The wall was, as I have said, not at all high. With a run and a jump I got my hands over the edge and an instant later was perched astride on the top of it. I had chosen a spot where the wall was overhung by the branches of a large ash, so that I was not likely to be seen. I dropped lightly to the ground.

## I SPOIL HER EVENING OUT

At that same instant came a sharp pain in the calf of my left leg and a low snarling. I struck out wildly in the darkness and my hands encountered a rough coat. I staggered and fell. The snarling increased in volume and the scrabbling as of a hound trying to get a better purchase was the only other sound. The brute had me by the leg and my one thought was to prevent it from getting me by the throat. I beat at its jaws with the end of my electric torch, but it would not loosen its hold. To my fear of the hound was added the fear that its keeper might come upon the scene at any moment. I dropped the torch, groped with my right hand in my pocket and pulled out my sheath-knife. That was almost my undoing. For the beast let go its grip on my calf and sprang forward. For one horrible instant its great slabbering muzzle was thrust against my chin. Its eyes gleamed in the darkness and its determination seemed all the more remorseless from the fact that save for its low snarling it was silent. It gave no sort of tongue; it might, save for its weight and strength, have been a ghostly hound in a nightmare.

I had the sheath-knife gripped properly now—the sheath had fallen off, else had I surely perished



—and, as the jaws snapped at my throat, I thrust the blade deep into the creature's side. It gave a choking bark. I withdrew the knife and stabbed again and again, with a desperate energy, feeling a little sick—for I hated to do it. The animal grunted. Its weight on my chest became suddenly enormous, but no longer menacing. I pushed it aside and staggered to my feet.

I looked down in the darkness. It was difficult to distinguish my adversary, but it appeared to be some kind of Alsatian wolfhound. I staggered away and, twenty yards farther off, sat down at the foot of a tree and did what I could to deal with the torn muscles of my calf, which was bleeding freely. I knew that, when the wound had cooled, I should be as lame as a beggar. Fortunately I had a large linen handkerchief with me and with this I bound it up as best I could.

I stumbled off in the direction of the château, which gleamed ghostly white in the risen moon. Unmolested I gained, at the cost of some considerable pain, the low stone wall surrounding the formal garden. Though I made every effort to move silently, it seemed to me as though my footsteps rang loud in the night.

I turned the corner of a box hedge and stopped dead, my arm lifted in defence, and crushing myself back involuntarily into the trim clipped leaves. For within six feet of me stood a man, his hand upraised to strike. Then, with a nervous giggle, I stepped forward again; for the man was of stone, one of half a dozen statues that stood about a fountain.

I had now only the width of the terrace to cross. The château was flooded in moonlight, very tall and silent. Great windows, fifteen feet high perhaps, lined the wall opposite which I was crouching. The curtains were drawn, but through one of them came a gleam of light.

I lay on my stomach by the edge of the terrace, sweating. The pain in my calf was forgotten or clouded by growing anguish and excitement. Somewhere an owl hooted, once, softly.

I staggered to my feet, crossed the silent terrace and, a moment later, was kneeling under the window behind which the light was shining. Here I was prepared to make use of my knife, still bloody in my hand. To my relief it was unnecessary, for the window was ajar. I pushed it gently open, slipped inside and found myself



in a tall library, lined on three sides with books, tiers and tiers of them, all arranged on the most modern principles, on bright steel shelves, flanked with card indexes and filing cabinets. There was here no sense of learning or leisure or bookish ease. It was a twentieth-century interior enclosed in a shell of the eighteenth century.

I began to cross the room. It was covered with a plain felt carpet of great thickness upon which my foot made no sound. I took only a few steps, however.

"*Encore un peu de champagne ?*" said a voice.

"Thank you, Monsieur. A little if you please."

I turned my head. A door partially covered by curtains was to my right. Through it streamed a warm light, for the room in which I stood was almost in darkness. I waited a moment, but nothing further was said. There came next a scrape of chairs and in panic I stepped back within the heavy folds of the window curtains. I heard a soft click and the library was flooded with light from bulbs hidden behind the cornices.

"We will have coffee in the next room," said a voice, "and perhaps a liqueur."



A moment later du Bertrand appeared on the threshold. He stood aside and Hilda entered the room. She was wearing a cheap white evening frock of charmeuse. She was smiling, but it seemed to me that her eyes were grave.

"What a lovely library you have, Monsieur du Bertrand," she said. "And what a lot of books!"

She ran forward and, standing in the middle of the room, looked about her. The gesture was affected. She was playing a part, but not too well. Did it deceive du Bertrand?

He moved to her side and, taking her hand, led her to a deep arm-chair, beside which stood a small steel table. On it were set slim bottles of liqueur.

"*Crème de menthe*, perhaps?" said du Bertrand.

He held up a bottle and, at the same instant, a man-servant entered with coffee upon a silver tray.

"Please," said Hilda.

The serving-man withdrew.

Du Bertrand sat down, his white hair gleaming above his dark eyes. Hilda sipped her *crème de menthe*—Hilda who despised all sweet

things. She even held the little finger stuck stiffly out. Du Bertrand watched her with a smile; but there was a sly intentness in his amusement which I did not like.

"A piano," said Hilda, turning with a swish of her skirts. "How charming."

"Do you play?" said du Bertrand.

"I am fond of music."

"Who is your favourite composer?"

"Wagner," declared Hilda without the slightest hesitation. "I adore Wagner."

"Which of the operas do you like best?"

"*Tristan*," she said.

She sang a phrase softly and broke off.

"The love-call," she went on. "It all grows out of that."

"It is a beautiful opera," du Bertrand admitted gravely.

"I find it impossible to exhaust Wagner," went on Hilda with enthusiasm, "or to know too much about him and his music. I read any book I can get."

"Indeed," said du Bertrand. "I have a small collection myself."

"May I see?"

"Of course."

He pointed to a row of shelves.

"Is there anything there you would like to read?"

Hilda jumped up and went to the shelves. My heart was beating high as she took down one of the books.

Before she opened it, however, du Bertrand went up to her and took her by the wrist.

"Come here a moment," he said, leading her back to the middle of the room.

She followed, clearly disconcerted, but making no resistance.

"You are more beautiful than Françoise," he said suddenly. "I hope it will not be necessary for you to share her fate."

## CHAPTER XVII.

## I FAIL TO TAKE HER HOME

HILDA turned swiftly as though in flight, but quickly checked herself and stood facing him bravely. I saw that she had turned a little white, but even more striking was the sudden contrast between her late fluttering impersonation of the young Wagnerian and her present attitude—tense, expectant and very quiet.



## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

"It is Fräulein von Esseling, is it not?" continued du Bertrand.

He approached her and looked her coolly up and down. Then with a gesture he indicated a sofa which directly faced the curtains behind which I was crouching.

"Sit down, Fräulein. We must have a little talk together."

Behind the curtain I gripped my pistol and stood ready. Hilda was sitting opposite to me now, leaning back slightly, the curve of her young body taut beneath the silk of her frock.

"You would boast, perhaps, of your efficiency?" she said.

Du Bertrand stood looking down at her and did not answer for a moment.

"Would it impress you if I did? I do not think so. Most women pretend to dislike a conceited man, but it is the peacock who spreads his tail that has the most success. But you are different, and spreading the tail is a form of courtship with which in the circumstances I may perhaps be permitted to dispense."

"Courtship?" said Hilda, lifting her eyebrows.

"Besides," continued du Bertrand with a smile, "I might more appropriately flatter *you* than myself. You thought to deceive me.

That was bold. You very nearly succeeded. That was clever. Unfortunately, however, the persons for whom you are working—the German secret police, is it not?—are unaware of all the methods used in my factory to keep control over our workers. You were asked—if you remember—to put your finger-prints opposite your pay-sheet?”

“I was,” said Hilda.

“All who enter themselves on our waiting lists are asked to leave their finger-prints with us. Our workers even desire it; for it is literally their sign-manual and involves for us a solemn undertaking to employ them when a vacancy occurs. The prints you made on the pay-sheet were as a matter of routine compared with those of Gertrude Burgener. They were found not to correspond. You were therefore an impostor and your movements were investigated. We found quite soon that you had quitted Munich somewhat hastily after an interview with the head of the secret police.”

“It is a handsome tail,” said Hilda.

Du Bertrand smiled his appreciation.

“*Touché*,” he said. “It seems that I am not to have things all my own way. But that only makes it the more delightful to receive you here.

Françoise also was a woman of spirit—rather difficult at times, so that, to keep her interested, I found it necessary to tell her things which it had been better for her not to have learned. Still, I had my reward.”

He turned his head slowly, and I followed the direction of his gaze, which had come to rest upon a broad divan in the corner of the room by the fire, covered with a sheet of some silver tissue.

Then, abruptly, his tone changed. He took a step forward.

“But that was a trifle,” he said. “This will be different; for you, unlike Françoise, are of the hated race.”

The hot brown eyes were now blazing with fanaticism.

“I was not happy with Françoise. She had done me no wrong. She was a brave woman and, had it been possible, I would have spared her at the last. With you it will be otherwise. In you I hold at my pleasure all the women of your race. I represent my own people—lord and master of you and yours.”

Hilda looked back at him unflinchingly.

“I think better of your people, M. du Bertrand. Only the baser sort would trample on



an enemy whom they have disarmed. I cannot believe that France, whom we have known as brave and generous, can fall so low."

"There can never be ease between us," said du Bertrand. "It is useless for you to appeal to a generosity which your people would never understand. You shall know me in the only way possible to one of you. Your only grace shall be that of a wise submission."

He stepped towards her and laid his hands upon her shoulders. That I could endure no longer. I stepped from behind the curtain, and in two strides was across the room with my hands at his throat. I believe that in my blind rage I should have choked the life out of him there and then, had it not been for Hilda.

"Ronald . . . Ronald," she was saying, as I gripped him and held him down on the divan.

"Not that," she urged, and ran quickly to the window.

Still I gripped him blindly, till at last, through the mists of passion, I found that Hilda was again beside me.

"Take these cords," she urged, "make him fast."

Mechanically I took from her cords torn from

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

the curtains which she thrust at me; and, holding him down, his head in the cushions of the divan, I secured his hands behind his back. We tied his ankles. Then I caught up an ebony ruler from the writing-table and with his own silk handkerchief I bound it in his mouth. Then we propped him in a chair, his white hair disordered, flowing back from his broad forehead; his eyes hot and uneasy and the grotesque line of the black ruler protruding from either side of his mouth.

"Lock the door, Hilda," I said.

She passed through to the other room, but returned in a moment.

"It was locked already," she said. "He did not mean to be disturbed."

"You will agree, perhaps, that I did well to come," I answered grimly.

She paid me no attention, however, for she was busy running her hand through one of the card indexes under the shelves opposite the window. With a cry of triumph she withdrew a card and turned to the shelves. Then came a cry of protest.

"It isn't here," she said.

She turned and her eyes brightened.

"Of course," she said, picking up from the

table the book she had taken down from the shelves in playing her comedy with du Bertrand, "I removed it myself under his very eyes."

She opened the book and a sheet of paper fell to the ground. She picked it up and handed it to me. I saw that it was covered with rows of figures, hastily scrawled, with, at the foot of it, the code signature of Françoise.

I folded it up and put it in my pocket.

"Come, Hilda," I urged.

We slipped through the long windows, crossed the terrace at a run, although my leg was paining me considerably, and stood a moment in the shadow of the box hedge. The dew was heavy on the grass as we moved forward to the shelter of the trees.

"Let me carry you," I begged. "This is heavy going."

"Don't be absurd, Ronald. If you carry me now, I shall have to carry *you* later on. What has happened to your leg?"

"Bitten by a dog," I said. "The body should be hereabouts."

We had reached the wall and I looked anxiously about for traces of the dead hound.

"I could have sworn it was here," I said. "Look, the impress of its form on these dead



leaves. Someone has found it and taken it away."

Hilda gazed at me and nodded.

"Yes," she said. "They will be looking now for the person who killed it."

I got astride the wall and helped Hilda to follow me. Thence we dropped easily into the road on the other side.

"Where next?" she asked.

"Straight back to Königstal," I answered.

"At this time of night and in this frock?"

"You will have time to change it. For I must call at the garage and raise a car."

We tramped on in silence down the hard asphalt road till we reached Rheinau. There I left Hilda at the house of Burkhardt's sister-in-law and went myself to the garage.

Burkhardt was awake and soon alert in counsel, though he was not pleased to be informed that I required his Citroën without delay, reminding me that he had already entrusted me with a motor bicycle which I had thought fit to abandon somewhere in Germany. His manner changed, however, when I offered to buy his car at double its real value.

I filled up immediately with petrol, saw that the papers were in order, and drove round to

pick up Hilda. It was then nearly one o'clock in the morning and I was in a fever to depart.

The journey that followed, with its desultory and anxious talk, was oddly colourless. I had rescued Hilda at the eleventh hour and we were escaping headlong through the autumn night. Surely there should have been a note of high romance, with suspense to give it an edge, tremulous with expectation. But the reaction had come. We had both been tried to the full extent of our endurance, and every nerve was dead. We sat silent, or even bickering, as the car measured out the miles all too slowly for our peace of mind. That night remains curiously blank in my memory. I can only clearly remember that we were both extremely weary, and, for all our success in getting so easily away from Rheinau, oddly dejected.

We made fairly good time to Strassburg and drove, without pause, through the sleeping town and over the bridge to Kehl.

"We will go straight to Königstal," I said, as we pulled up at the frontier. "But first we will telephone."

As I had anticipated, I was unable to get Granby himself. Nor did I think fit to disturb the Graf, but his confidential servant was brought



to the telephone after some delay. He informed me that Granby had left Königstal shortly after the departure of the Fräulein von Esseling. He had left word that no messages need be forwarded to him from Königstal and that, until he returned to the castle or communicated with the Graf, he must be regarded as inaccessible. I explained briefly that I was bringing Fräulein von Esseling to Königstal by car and that, barring accidents, we should arrive next morning at the castle.

I then said that I had an urgent message for the Colonel which I would dictate over the wire and which was to be delivered to him as soon as he came within reach. I thereupon dictated the code figures which Françoise had set down. As a further precaution I telephoned the same code message to Ponsonby, Poste Restante, Munich, in case Granby should be calling there for correspondence.

After telephoning I posted the original of the message to Königstal, and we continued our journey.

Hilda, though I urged her, was reluctant to sleep—fearing that, if she did, I might fall myself to nodding at the wheel, and thus bring disaster upon us both. She talked to me now and then



of du Bertrand. He had apparently made a charming host and, oddly enough, Hilda seemed to have no kind of resentment against him.

"The man," I said, "is a brute."

"For liking the looks of *me*?" she asked.

"Really," I protested, "for a woman who has suffered the last indignity . . ."

"Surely, my dear, not the last. He might not have noticed me at all."

She paused and added:

"I am not sure that I couldn't have managed him."

"You're sorry, perhaps, that I turned up."

"I'm not sorry you were behind the curtain. But you needn't have been in such a hurry to come out. If you had stayed behind a little longer, we might now have been wiser than we are."

"Sorry," I said stiffly.

We were running between Appenweier and Ulm. The dawn was grey in the sky behind the spires of the old Minster. Here I turned south and, as the day grew stronger, I began to recover my spirits. So far we were unmolested. So far we were safe. Surely by now we had nothing more to fear. Hilda was sleeping at last, pale under the dawn. We were in a charming country at the valley's mouth; villages and

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green woods succeeded each other. The car was not fast and it was noisy, but it was taking us to our journey's end. We might have been a honeymoon couple on a motor trip, save that I was still in my overalls, unshaven, dog-tired and with a calf that ached at intervals.

At nine o'clock we pulled up at a little village not far from Augsburg, where we breakfasted, and bathed in a mill-pool. Refreshed in body and spirit we took the road again. Half a mile beyond the village Hilda touched my arm suddenly and pointed ahead. Running in front of us, at a steady pace, was a smart motor van with SIGMA painted on the tailboard. I slowed down.

"One of the delivery vans," I said.

"Yes," said Hilda. "But I think it may be better to turn off."

I took the first turning to the right and presently found myself bumping over an uneven road. We had now a map taken from the farm where we had breakfasted, and Hilda showed me that the road would eventually land us south of Augsburg, where we could again strike a main road to Munich.

It was, I think, after some five miles of this rougher going that Hilda happened to look back.

## I FAIL TO TAKE HER HOME

"Can you get any more speed out of this machine, Ronald?" she asked.

"Why?"

"There is another of the Sigma vans behind us."

I looked in the driving mirror and caught a glimpse of it, perhaps a mile away.

"Going its rounds," I suggested.

"Perhaps," she answered.

I put on a little extra speed until the Citroën was running as fast as she was able. The delivery van made no pursuit and the distance between us increased. I sighed with relief, and felt almost gay when we turned into the main road, ten miles from Augsburg. Here we made better progress and I began to hope that we might be in Königstal for tea. I said as much to Hilda.

"Perhaps," she answered. "But the van is still behind us."

We turned a bend in the road.

"Why doesn't the thing come up closer?" she wondered. "It is making no effort whatever to overtake us."

Ahead of us was the main railway line from Augsburg to Munich which crossed the road over a stone bridge, perhaps a hundred yards



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away. A car coming from the opposite direction had just arrived beneath it when it stopped and slewed abruptly across the road.

"Damnation!" I muttered.

I put on my brakes and skidded to a standstill just under the parapet of the bridge.

At the same instant there came a cry from Hilda and I had a swift vision of a man dropping from the bridge plumb upon the bonnet of the Citroën.

"Put 'em up," said Francis Wyndham, as he peered at us over the windscreen.

### CHAPTER XVIII.

### I ATTEND A REHEARSAL

"MR. BRIERCLIFFE," came a voice by now familiar, "I am glad to be meeting you again."

It was the Mighty Magistro who spoke and I faced him, dumb and weary. We were in the great hall of the clinic of Dr. Axius, with its tapestries and Period furniture and the time was perhaps eight o'clock in the evening. I will pass over the hours that had intervened between our capture by Francis Wyndham near Augsburg and the time when, tired with three or four hours

of fast driving in a closed and curtained car, we had arrived at the clinic. There Hilda and I had been instantly separated. I did not know where she had been put and hardly dared to guess. For myself, I had remained in the hall with one of the black-shirts to keep an eye on me until presently the Mighty Magistro had entered and welcomed me in the above terms.

Ruggiero was in evening dress. His great beard curled down over his shirt-front in a very imposing manner. I was tired, hungry and unshaven, still in my dirty overalls. The contrast was striking and evidently not disagreeable to the Mighty One.

I did not answer him. There was nothing that I could say. Now that the blow had fallen—worse still, now that even Hilda was in the power of our enemies—all emotion was for the moment frozen at the source, though I knew this condition would soon pass and that then imagination, my sworn tormentor, would do its worst.

Ruggiero, however, was disposed to talk.

“Have you eaten yet?” he genially inquired.

I shook my head.

“That must be remedied,” he said. “And if

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I may say so, Mr. Briercliffe, you could do perhaps with a bath?"

"I could," I answered.

"We will do what we can," he responded, and signed to the silent black-shirt beside me.

I rose and was taken to a bathroom in the modern part of the building. There I refreshed myself and, on my return to the hall, half an hour later, I found spread for me some cold chicken and a bottle of wine.

Of Hilda there was still no sign.

During the meal Ruggiero tried in vain to get me to say something of the message. He knew from du Bertrand that we had taken it. I had been searched. So presumably had Hilda. The Mighty One was voluble in his speculations and conclusions, but I listened in stubborn silence and would say neither yes nor no to his leading questions.

"Of course," he said, "you have sent either the original or its contents to your friend and colleague, Colonel Granby. I'm sorry you are so reluctant to speak of it. We shall have to return to the subject later."

He began to pace up and down the room while I ate. When I had finished, he turned his fine head and looked at me.



"My friend Wyndham, I believe," he said, "showed you the mediæval part of this house. You will allow me, perhaps, to conduct you over the modern wing. If we might go at once!"

He spoke as though he were addressing someone whom he had prevailed upon to make a fourth at bridge in the next room. I rose to my feet, limping a little as I walked forward.

"But, of course," he said, watching me as I moved, "that leg of yours also requires attention. We will go first to the infirmary. It is next door to the laboratory from which you and Colonel Granby so resourcefully removed yourselves a few days ago."

I followed him through the green baize door and down the corridor. The Mighty Magistro pressed a button on the wall. A door slid back and I found myself in an admirably fitted surgery. Ruggiero pointed to a severely hygienic couch.

"I will change the dressings," he said.

I looked at him, surprised. This kindness was disconcerting. But his back was turned to me and he was busy with something in one of the glass cabinets. He turned round, his hands full of bandages and lint. When he exposed my wound he pursed his lips, looking every inch a physician.

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"Teeth," said the Mighty One, "dog's teeth. But the wound is clean enough. I don't think we shall take any harm."

He was dressing the wound skilfully as he spoke. Then he turned to another glass cabinet, from which he took a hypodermic syringe.

"A little anti-rabies injection would not be amiss," he said playfully. "We don't want you raving on our hands."

I looked doubtfully at the syringe, but said nothing, and after he had made the injection and bandaged my leg once more, he gave me a hand and drew me to my feet.

"Now, Mr. Briercliffe, we will continue our tour of inspection."

"I am at your disposal," I answered briefly.

We left the surgery and walked down the corridor. On either side were bedrooms, all empty, as he showed me, save for one. The Mighty Magistro bade me look through a peephole in the door. Inside was a man lying on a bed dressed in vivid pyjamas of orange silk. His eyes were closed. He was breathing regularly and now and then a smile, as though the sleeper were in great delight, crossed his face. Ruggiero pointed to the lintel of the door. Above it was written in German: Rest after Toil.



"What does this mean?" I asked in a whisper.

"All in good time," replied the Mighty Magistro in his ordinary tones. "And you need not lower your voice, Mr. Briercliffe, he will not awaken yet."

Again the man turned and smiled. The Mighty Magistro touched me on the shoulder and I walked beside him down the corridor. We turned to the left.

"Rest after toil," said the Mighty Magistro. "Next the toil and, after that, the reward."

I made no reply to these observations. By now the misery and uncertainty of my own position were almost overpowered by curiosity. What else was to follow? Why did the sleeper sleep so quietly with a smile upon his face?

Down the corridor we went till we reached a door which slid sideways, disclosing stairs. We climbed twenty feet, perhaps, to another door which, opening, led us to a gallery. Ruggiero, who was in front of me, beckoned me to his side. I joined him and looked down from the gallery which ran along one wall of a long room, rather like a riding school, very bare and lighted only from the roof. Down one length of the



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hall ran a pavement, as of a street in a town. There was even a lamp-post with a notice hanging from it in German: "Persons On Foot May Cross Here." On the other side of the hall was a similar pavement; between the two ran a stretch of road and at the far end of the hall were doors.

In the midst of this room or hall were a number of men dressed very variously, some decently, others in rags.

They moved aimlessly and apparently with no set purpose. Suddenly a voice screamed from a megaphone somewhere high up in the roof of this strange place:

"No. 15, hunch the shoulders and step slower. You are not now on parade at Potsdam. That is no gait for a beggar."

One of the dirtiest of the men on the floor glanced nervously up at the roof and then hunched his disreputably clad shoulders and slouched a pace or two.

"Much better," said the voice. "You, too, No. 11—a shade less military, if you please. You are not in uniform. Ex-officer down on his luck, not quite so stiff in the backbone."

The man addressed, who was tall with a haggard face and was moving down the pave-

ment with a very upright carriage, slackened obediently at the command of the unseen voice.

"This," said the Mighty Magistro proudly, "is my own idea. See what happens next."

But I needed no bidding; I was fascinated by the strange sight and the obscure play upon which these actors were engaged. I noticed there was no expression on their faces except when they spoke and that they fell automatically back into a mechanical repose. Only their eyes were hot and fiery. Then I noticed another thing. A man in a green uniform of the German police had taken his stand in the middle of the road. He was waving his baton to direct imaginary traffic, and at that moment it ceased to be imaginary, for the doors at the far end of the hall opened and there shot into view two more men in the uniform of the police, riding motor cycles. Shortly after them came a long grey motor car, a chauffeur at the wheel and two men seated at the back. I gave a gasp of astonishment at the sight of them, for one of the two men was the President and the other the Chancellor of the German Reich. As the car came into view the loafers on the pavements sprang to action. A sharp whistle sounded and



three of the loafers leaped at the policeman on point duty, knocking him headlong into the path of one of the motor cycles. It collapsed, throwing its rider; at the same instant the haggard man jumped from the pavement and discharged a stream of bullets into the heads of the Chancellor and the President. Then with a shriek of brakes the car drew to a standstill.

"No. 6," said the unseen voice. "You were ten seconds too late. No. 8, you must strike at the base of the skull. No. 15, you have forgotten the chauffeur. We must have all that over again."

Obediently the car backed, while the men in the hall resumed their former positions. The motor cyclist picked himself up and wheeled his machine away. The only person who did not move was the unfortunate policeman. He was lying where he had fallen.

"Wait," said the voice. "No. 2 is hurt. Take him away and call an understudy."

Two men with a stretcher appeared from a door beneath the gallery on which we were standing. They put the policeman on the stretcher and bore it away.

"Next on the list, look sharp," said the voice, and, even as it spoke, another policeman com-



plete in uniform and with baton took the place of his fallen comrade and began once more to direct an imaginary stream of traffic.

The Mighty Magistro touched me on the shoulder.

"Come," he said.

"But the men in the car," I stammered.

"Dummies," responded Ruggiero.

"We leave nothing to chance," he continued, as he led me down the stairs and into the corridor.

"Our people are docile, but we cannot trust to their initiative. These rehearsals are essential if everything is to go right on the day."

I followed in his wake—horror now prevailing over my curiosity. For this was no play-acting that I had seen, but a real event, prepared down to the smallest detail.

The Chancellor and President of the Reich were to be slain together.

The Mighty One, however, had stopped opposite a third door. As it opened there came to my ears the sound of music and, as we crossed the threshold, everything was changed. The air was heavy with perfume. The room, or rather series of rooms, each half-divided from the last by hanging curtains, was richly appointed. I seemed to have wandered into an Arabian Night.

## THE TWO UNDERTAKERS

Fantastic divans with half-closed curtains sprawled along the walls and beside them were low tables of black gleaming wood. Little negro boys with huge turbans of dull gold and crimson were moving about bearing upon trays of burnished copper tall glasses full of an amber liquid. Underfoot were coloured carpets glowing under lights which were dim and shaded. I stood by the Mighty Magistro. The music ceased and, for a moment, I heard nothing but the beating of my own heart. Then, or so it seemed to me, sound came back—whispers and light laughter, as the curtains stirred, sighs of content. There came a soft clapping of hands and a sudden pool of light was poured upon the floor of the central room. On the instant there appeared a dancer, slim and exquisite, upheld on her naked feet. Somewhere a flute sounded—a veritable *Syrinx*—and the dancer marked each note as it fell.

I felt the hand of the Mighty One on my shoulder.

“That,” he said, “is the reward.”

I turned and followed him blindly from the room, down that interminable corridor, until we found ourselves back in the hall of the castle.

“Well,” said the Mighty One as the green baize door closed upon us, “what do you make of it?”

I stood a moment staring at the great tapestry and then wheeled round upon him.

“The intention is clear,” I said. “These are your tame assassins.”

Ruggiero nodded.

“History repeats itself,” he murmured. “The world is desperate and assassination is again a political weapon—or shall we say that it has become a moral symbol or gesture? What time could be more propitious than this for the strange experiment which I have dared in this place to revive? Like conditions produce like effects and human nature is not transformed. What was possible seven hundred years ago in Syria is still humanly possible to-day. I have reconstructed here to-day the famous Alamut, the eagle’s nest, stronghold of Hassan-ben-Sabah, the Old Man of the Mountain, heart of the famous sect of the Assassins; young men who, drugged with hashish, moved forth, a terror to all the sultans, to destroy the enemies of their master—the sect that crept by night into the tent of Saladin and slew Madaud in his prime.”

He pointed to a tall oak lectern which I had



not previously noticed standing a little to my right hand.

“Read,” he said.

A great book was spread open, illuminated and seemingly of great value. Its script was black-letter Latin. I could not construe it, and Ruggiero, eager to show his erudition, thrust me aside and, bending over the thick pages, read :

“Hi non haereditaria successione, sed meritorum praerogativa magistrum solent sibi praeficere et eligere praeceptorem, quem spretis aliis dignitatem nominibus, Senem vocant; cui tantae subjectionis et obedientiae vinculo solent obligari, ut nihil sit tam durum, tam difficile tamque periculosum, quod ad magistri imperium, animis ardentibus non aggrediantur implere. Nam inter caetera, si quos habent principes odiosos aut genti suae suspecto, data de suis, vel pluribus, sica, non considerato rei exitu, utrum evadere possit, illuc contendit, cui mandatum est; et tam diu pro complendo anxius imperio, circuit et laborat, quousque casu injunctum peragat officium, praeceptoris mandato satisfaciens. Hos tam nostri quam

Sarraceni (nescimus unde deducto nomine)  
Assassinos vocant."

He paused on finishing the Latin and began slowly to translate :

"These people set over themselves a Ruler and Governor, whom they choose not by the way of inheritance but by preferring the best. They call him the Old Man, despising all other titles of honour, and bind themselves so lowly and dutifully to him that there is no undertaking so stiff and perilous upon which they will not at his word hotly engage. Of this I give an example. Suppose there be certain persons of note whom this people hates or distrusts : then to one or more of the liegemen a dagger is given and he, giving no thought whether he can make good his escape when the deed is done, goes presently thither where he is bidden ; and there with anxious mind he prowls about and rests not until it is given him to fulfil his task and accomplish his Lord's command. These men were called, both by the Saracens and the Franks, ' Assassins '—whence I know not."

"Assassins," he murmured; "they affrighted William the good Archbishop of Tyre, and many a worse man."

I looked at him incredulously.

"No," he protested. "I am not mad. I am not even original. I have merely resorted to an ancient and obvious discipline. How many men in Germany do you think are living on the edge of destruction—who have lost all hope and all pride? They have nothing to lose and I have much to offer them—at a price which they will pay when it is required of them."

"But you, yourself," I said, "are not master here."

He looked at me for a moment with his head on one side and his great beard thrust out.

"Not yet," he said slowly.

"And why have you shown me all this?" I asked.

"I thought it well that you should be able to appreciate the resources of this establishment. There came with you Hilda von Esseling. But the party is not complete. I am thinking of my old friend and enemy, the Colonel Granby, and I am hoping that the gallant Colonel will see his way to paying us a visit in the near future."

"It will not be easy to secure his presence," I said dryly.



“Not even upon a pressing invitation from yourself?”

“And if I refuse to send it?”

Ruggiero put his head on one side and his white teeth gleamed for a moment in his beard.

“In that case,” he answered softly, “you will be required to assist us at one of our next rehearsals; and, as for the Fräulein Hilda . . .”

I felt the blood coming to my head.

“She,” he concluded quietly, “will join the staff of our Palace of Delights.”

CHAPTER XIX.

I AM FACED WITH A BRIDE

I PREFER not to dwell on the scene which followed. For a moment I lost all control. I raved and stormed at Ruggiero, who shook his head at me sadly. Suffice it that, in the midst of it all, Wyndham entered, took Ruggiero aside and spoke with him a moment. I did not catch what was said, but, as a result of it, I was respited for an hour and sent back to the upper room in the round tower where I had previously been confined with Granby.

There was no kind of comfort in the room,

which contained nothing but the two stools previously there. I was tired and cold. Autumn had laid her chill fingers on the land. I shivered, and a great weariness fell upon me. Now and then I caught faint sounds from below in the darkness—the grind of gears, a shout or two, the beating of a metallic drum. At the moment I could not think what they were. Then I inferred that the rehearsal that I had attended was still in progress down below. I had not at that time read the message of Françoise, but what I had seen that day had revealed to me the nature of the event which was to occur on October 6th. The grim plan was shadowy and formless, but its intention was clear. Du Bertrand, with the assistance of his two undertakers, as Granby had so fittingly named them, foiled in open politics, was working in foul ways for the ruin of a great nation. He was using the lesser talents of Ruggiero and Wyndham, two broken and unscrupulous men, who had created for him a murder machine to find the like of which, as Ruggiero had truly said, it was necessary to go back to the days when the Old Man of the Mountain had fallen beneath the spears of the Mongols. They had taken their creatures from among the seven million men in Germany who



were without work or hope or pleasure, drugged them into submission, tamed them with delights, drilled them into obedience. They would be sent forth, like automata, to slay. The ground, too, had been carefully prepared. These terrible accidents, coming in single spies, had spread panic and distrust far and wide. How they had been organised I did not yet know, but that they were contrived by one or other of the undertakers seemed beyond doubt. The public services had been, somehow, undermined. The final blow would fall and the great Hindenburg and his Chancellor, falling to the assassins, would bring down with them all public order and authority.

I do not pretend that these thoughts passed through my mind in so orderly a fashion as they are here set down. The light came in drifts and snatches as I stood in one of the embrasures and watched the day die slowly down the sky, which changed from clear blue to orange, to opal and at last to a velvet cloak pricked out in stars. Sleepy birds sang a few late notes far below me and the sunlight faded from the tree-tops, leaving the meadow in which the castle stood in deep shadow. All that, of course, would go on as before. The birds would sing, the sun would rise, the earth put on and shed her summer green, what-



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ever man might do, even though in his folly he destroyed himself.

It was, I think, about seven o'clock in the evening that I was summoned. I was led straight down the stairs into the hall. The first person I saw was du Bertrand, his white hair flowing, his eyes keen and cool. He was seated at a table and both his undertakers were beside him. I was led up to them as a prisoner. Beside me moved the madman who had attended me to Königstal when I had fetched the message, and his eyes never left my face.

"Mr. Briercliffe," said du Bertrand, "you have had time to reflect. We now require an answer."

He spoke quickly and concisely, as a man of business is supposed to do. Tired though I was, I must fight again.

"One moment," I said; "let me get this quite clear. What is it exactly that you wish me to do?"

"Come, Mr. Briercliffe, Signor Ruggiero has put the position to you quite clearly. What you or the Fräulein von Esseling have discovered is a matter of complete indifference to us. You are here under our control. Colonel Granby, however, has disappeared and what he may



know or what he may do upon that knowledge during the next forty-eight hours may be vital. Colonel Granby must, therefore, be brought under our arrest. We must know where he is and what exactly was in the message which you removed from my library at Rheinau. Are you ready to help us, Mr. Briercliffe? I must have your decision at once."

"That is impossible," I said. "First, I do not know where Colonel Granby is to be found. Secondly, the message was in cypher."

"You should have something better to say than that, Mr. Briercliffe. You have been working in close touch with Colonel Granby since you first came into this affair, and to say that you don't know his whereabouts, is to waste both my time and yours. I saw you take the message with my own eyes. You would not destroy it unread or undeciphered. Either you know what it contains or you have sent it to Colonel Granby. Don't seek to trifle with me."

I faced them helplessly: du Bertrand seated in the chair, his unhappy eyes fixed inexorably upon me; behind him, the Assyrian countenance of Ruggiero; on his right the fair face of Francis Wyndham. What was I to do?

I had no weapons, for Hilda was in their hands. Beyond the white head of du Bertrand gleamed the green baize door; beyond that, the corridor that led to the room of ease after toil; still further beyond lay the infamous Palace of Delights.

"I must speak with Fräulein von Esseling," I said slowly, "before we can come to terms."

I got no further, for at that instant came an astonishing diversion. The door was flung open suddenly, and one of the men in black shirts appeared on the threshold.

"The Graf von Esseling," he announced.

A moment later the tall figure of the old man moved into the room. He stood, leaning heavily upon an ebony stick, his eyes piercing and very bright, his eagle nose jutting over the firm lips, the beard prone upon his chest. He stood and looked at us all, but especially at du Bertrand.

Du Bertrand gazed at him for a moment in silence. Then a slow smile spread over his lips and was gone again.

"To what do we owe the honour?" he formally inquired.

"Monsieur du Bertrand," replied the Graf,

"I have come for my daughter. I am satisfied that she is here. She must return with me."

Du Bertrand rose and bowed.

"This is most opportune, Herr Graf," he said. "I do not deny that your daughter is here. I was, in fact, proposing that this young man"—here he glanced in my direction—"should take steps with a view to her release. You have come, it seems, on a similar errand."

"I do not understand."

"You are, perhaps, able to inform us of the whereabouts of Colonel Granby, lately your guest?"

"Colonel Granby left Königstal two days ago. I do not know what has become of him."

"Presumably, Herr Graf, you have come here to be helpful. May I ask in what manner you think you can be of use to us?"

Von Esseling drew himself up.

"The position," he said quietly, "seems to me to need but little explanation. I know that you are desperate men and that you are playing fast and loose with this poor world of ours. You, M. du Bertrand, are hoping to perpetuate a state of affairs which is beginning to make



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France hated and feared throughout Europe and beyond."

"I would make France respected and obeyed. Europe needs a master, as so often before in the history of the world. France has the power and the intelligence. Her mind and will can alone save the nations from ruin."

"It will avail you little to lord it over a Europe shaken with revolution. Your wiser spirits look to other ways and methods and du Bertrand, who might have done his country a statesman's service, has chosen to become a criminal to be disowned and punished by the nation he professes to serve."

"My country will accept her dominion. I work for her security and survival against the dreamers who believe in a new order. There is no new thing under the sun. History must repeat itself. The battle is still to the strong. That is how the world has lived and died for thousands of years. No weak compassion for a fallen foe can change the old order of things. We have your daughter and you would place yourself in peril for her sake. That is very noble and fine. But your gift is of no avail."

The Graf turned and looked at me once and then his gaze went back to du Bertrand.

"You seek Colonel Granby, I think," he said quietly. "You are afraid of him because you have an enterprise on foot which cannot see the light of day until it is accomplished?"

"You put the position clearly," rejoined du Bertrand. "The plan which I have devised for the destruction of your country is all but complete. The final blow is to be delivered very soon. I cannot endanger this event by any weakness at the last. Colonel Granby may even now hold us at his mercy. I do not know how much he knows. Nor would I care what he knew if he were under my control. That, however, is not the case. But we hold Mr. Briercliffe and we hold your daughter. Nor will they be yielded up until Colonel Granby has been secured."

There was a silence.

"You need a hostage," said the Graf at last. "I am here to take the place of my daughter."

"I need, as you say, a hostage. I am not looking for a victim, Herr Graf. If you know where Colonel Granby is to be found and can produce him within the hour, you shall take back your daughter. I ask nothing better."

"I do not know where he is," he answered.

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Du Bertrand rose and, moving round the table, stood opposite the Graf, a foot or so away from him. They made an odd contrast. The Graf, tall and stooping over his stick; du Bertrand short, with his lion head, still oddly young for all his mane of white hair.

"Come," said du Bertrand, "we have talked long enough. You cannot save your daughter by evasion."

"This is no evasion," I burst out, moved beyond myself; "we do not know where to look for Colonel Granby. We could not help you if we would."

Du Bertrand regarded me a moment.

"You love Hilda von Esseling—is it not so?" he demanded suddenly.

I flinched from the harsh question that so abruptly laid bare my secret. The Graf von Esseling had turned his gaze upon me.

"I do," I said.

"You know what will surely happen to her if you refuse to help us?" he continued.

But it was the Graf who replied.

"Send for my daughter," he said. "She will answer you as I have done. Could we lead you direct to Colonel Granby not one of us would stir hand or foot."



Du Bertrand gazed at us both for a moment without speaking.

"I believe you," he said at last. "This, if I mistake not, is your heroic hour. I feel that you are not to be broken this night by threats or even by their performance. I must find other means to shake you." He reflected a moment and then turned abruptly to Ruggiero.

"Is there a priest at hand?" he asked.

"There is a priest in the village," Ruggiero replied.

Du Bertrand turned back to me.

"Mr. Briercliffe," he said, "you love the Fräulein von Esseling and you wish for nothing better in the world than to marry her?"

"Nothing better in the world," I repeated.

"You shall marry her here and now," he said quietly, "and you shall spend these next hours together. To-morrow"—he paused. "To-morrow," he continued slowly, "I shall hope to find you in a softer mood."

There was a moment's utter silence.

"Ruggiero," went on du Bertrand as I stared at him, lost utterly in amazement, "I will leave the arrangements in your hands. I am sure that, with your infallible sense of effect, you can be trusted to make the most of the situation."

Ruggiero bowed and smiled, while du Bertrand, his face now implacable, addressed his last word to me.

"Make no mistake," he said. "If at to-morrow's dawn I find you still in the same mind as I know you to be at this high moment, you and your wife"—I started at the name—"will suffer the fate which these gentlemen"—he glanced at Wyndham and Ruggiero—"have prepared for you."

At the Graf von Esseling I did not dare to look, but kept my eyes fixed upon du Bertrand.

"Is this a mockery?" I said at last.

Du Bertrand shook his head.

"No, Mr. Briercliffe, I was never more serious in my life. There is a time when it is well to be frank, and I have nothing now to conceal. We are on the edge of success. There is only a single flaw. Colonel Granby is still at large."

"If I could tell you now where Colonel Granby is to be found and if I invited him to put himself in your power, do you imagine he would come?"

"I have formed my own opinion of Colonel Granby. He would not come, perhaps; but, if

he knew the peril to which you and Hilda von Esseling and her father are now exposed, he would, I imagine, hesitate for just those few hours which to us are absolutely vital. Perhaps he might take the brave decision to sacrifice you all, but I do not think he would. He would prevaricate. He would attempt to rescue you. I might even afford him an opportunity of doing so—following the tactics which on a previous occasion succeeded so admirably with yourself when you escaped from the Sigma Works at Rheinau. Desperate stakes, Mr. Briercliffe, and the means must also be desperate. To warn Colonel Granby of your peril must clearly puzzle and delay any action he may take, and the warning must come from you. I have been unable to persuade you to send it, so I must leave that task to a gentler and, I trust, a more successful counsellor."

He paused and added :

"Your daughter, Herr Graf."

He turned his head as he spoke the last words and looked the Graf von Esseling in the face. The old man had drawn himself up and was gazing steadily at me.

"Herr Briercliffe," he said, "I entrust my daughter to you—her happiness in the hours



that may remain to us and her honour for evermore."

I forgot du Bertrand and his satellites. I saw as through a veil the great tapestries and the sunlight streaming through the window. I stretched out my hands to the Graf.

"If I am to have that honour, sir," I said, "then let it be so, for I am content."

## CHAPTER XX.

## I AM FORCIBLY MARRIED

OUR strange interview with du Bertrand was over by eight o'clock. I was led away, given food and drink, bathed and refreshed. And as I ate and drank, and was shaved and went through the hundred small gestures of the civilised man, my mind was in a dream. Bemused, yet at peace, for I could not imagine myself as a man condemned. I could think only of Hilda, who would come to me walking as a bride.

*"They have filled with sighing the city, and the ways thereof with tears. She rose and girded her sides. She set her face as a bride's."*

At ten o'clock the summons came and I was led back once more to the hall. Here a strange

company awaited me. Wyndham and Ruggiero were there, arrayed in the formal black coats of a wedding day. Ruggiero himself placed a white flower in my button-hole. Over against me stood the Graf, but I had eyes for none of them, for standing in the doorway which led to the tower was Hilda, dressed in the same shabby coat and skirt in which she had escaped from Rheinau. She moved at once to the side of her father and laid her hand upon his arm. Evidently they had talked things over together, for they said nothing, but only looked at each other with perfect understanding. Then, turning from her father, she held out her hands to me.

"Ronald," she said, "I am ready."

I could find no words. I could not even say her name. Vaguely I perceived at the back of the hall a table with lighted candles upon it, and a frightened man with silver hair, in a white surplice, with a stole about his neck and a book in his hand.

I saw Hilda move across the hall with her hand upon the arm of the Graf, and I was tapped on the shoulder by Ruggiero. Then I, too, moved forward and knelt down beside Hilda while the voice of the old priest whispered above our heads.

Wyndham was close beside us, his hand thrust

deep into the side pocket of his coat. The great questions were asked and answered. At Hilda I dared not look. I heard her voice, formal and steady, and presently there was the pressure of her hand on mine. Then suddenly I realised that we were man and wife, and we stood back from the priest and faced them all. There was a light in Hilda's eyes and my heart was leaping.

So, in the midst of our enemies, and with death beside us, were we married.

At the far end of the hall Ruggiero waited. Beside him was a table spread with food and wine and sweet cakes. We moved down the length of the hall towards it. I cannot say in what spirit Ruggiero had staged this fantastic event. Not, I think, in mockery, but merely responding—incurable showman that he was—to the romantic possibilities of the situation. He was grave and magnificent, so far subdued to the occasion that, for the moment, even his loquacity was kept firmly under restraint. Very solemnly he lifted a brimming glass and with Wyndham drank to bride and bridegroom.

Then he stepped forward.

"It is past ten o'clock," he said. "And the dawn is yet far off. But I will not speak to you of time. *Eternity was in our lips and eyes.* I must



remind you, even now, however, of the decision that lies before you both. There is a play by your English poet Flecker. He wrote of two lovers who had one night of love and then died. You will find a copy of it by your bedside. Meantime, Mr. Briercliffe, if at any time you would communicate with us, you have only to ring the bell and we will take the necessary steps. I rely upon your wife—as she now is—to join her persuasions to your own. Love to youth is not unpleasant.”

Hilda crossed the room and laid a hand on her father's shoulder.

“You should not have come to this place, my dear; but, as you have, you must try to get some rest. The decision lies with us and we shall know what we must do.”

“The Graf von Esseling,” put in Wyndham smoothly, “will have little cause to complain of our hospitality. He will occupy a room in the tower immediately below that of the chains. Every arrangement has been made for his comfort.”

Ruggiero bent forward suddenly, lifted from the table on which the fruit and wine were spread two candelabra and held them high. He made a fantastic figure as he moved towards us.

“Come,” he said.

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The door to the tower was flung wide and there, standing on alternate steps, were tall men, expressionless and sable. As we paused upon the stairs they raised each a hand in salute. Was it in derision? Only the master-showman could answer that. So, presently, we found ourselves in the round mediæval chamber that I knew so well, no longer, however, the bare stone room where lately I had waited with Granby. Gone were the two wooden stools. Great tapestries hung round the walls concealing the narrow embrasures and a brazier of sweet-smelling wood was burning brightly. The room was furnished in the style and manner of the Cinquecento. Beyond the brazier stood a great bed, inlaid with precious woods, hung testerwise with curtains, a lamp hanging from the canopy. Upon the floor were rugs of silk.

Ruggiero set down the candelabra on a table beside the bed.

"Beds," said the Mighty Magistro, "have sadly fallen from their high estate, and I consider myself fortunate in being able to supply you with a specimen which does not shame this high and romantic occasion. The Assyrians and Medes slept upon beds of stone; the Greeks of Odysseus upon wooden frames laced with hides. These



were the barbarians, and it is a far cry even in antiquity from these rude beginnings of respect for the place where man is born and loves and dies to the high Roman bed, ascended by steps, inlaid with bronze and set with rich hangings, or the solid silver bed of Heliogabalus. There followed a dark age for Europe when men slept upon benches or in shallow chests filled with leaves or moss till again the light of reason brought back the bed to pride and honour. Then came the baldaquin and the tester, the bed of justice, the beds which men saluted as an altar, beds hung with crimson velvet and stiff with gold."

He turned at the end of this elocutionary effort, bowed very low to Hilda, crossed to the door and faced us once more.

"There will be a s entry in the *chemin de ronde* during the night. But he will not trouble you unless you should make an effort to escape."

The door closed behind him and the key turned in the lock.

I could only stand staring with eyes that saw nothing but a mist, till a hand was laid upon my shoulder and I found Hilda beside me, her face uplifted. She smiled with her lips but her eyes were wet. I was rapt by an agony of passion



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and sweetness and sorrow. I caught her to me and we clung together speechless.

What were we to do in that mediæval chamber, with Death for a valet to wake us in the morning? And yet—ecstasy deepened, and soon I could not look or feel beyond the present. The world swam out of our ken and for a moment—how long it lasted I could not measure—we knew only the pleasant land of lovers, where, though the shadows deepened, we could lose ourselves in peace. I knew, without asking Hilda, what the end must be. There could be no surrender, so, while the time was ours, we must put our mark upon all that followed, so that it should bear the image and superscription of this hour. Then anything that came thereafter would be of small account.

I came back to a consciousness of time to hear the monotonous pacing of the sentry on the *chemin de ronde*. Or perhaps it was that I became aware of it only when it ceased. A voice, low but urgent, began to mutter protestingly.

“No, it is impossible . . . it is death . . . death . . . death.”

The word seemed to echo through the room, full of flickering shadows from the lamp that

hung above my head. I sat up and looked towards the covered embrasure to my right.

"What is it, sweetheart?" said Hilda from behind me.

"It is the sentry," I said.

"Come back, my darling," she entreated. "There is nothing we can do."

I turned and, at the sight of her, as she lay there propped on one arm, her eyes bright above her gleaming shoulders, there came upon me a wild hope that after all we might escape. Life had become more precious. To lose it now, or, what was worse, to have Hilda torn from me, would be infinitely harder.

Du Bertrand had known it would be so. He had counted on this weakness. The thought crossing my mind struck me with shame and fury. Was there no way out but death or surrender?

I crossed the room, drew back one of the tapestries and thrust my head through the embrasure. Outside the night was still and the moon rode high. Crouching, perhaps half a dozen paces from me, was the sentry. He was leaning over the parapet, muttering to himself. Then I heard something else—a creaking sound to which I could not for the moment put a name,

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and, even as I made to lean further out, I saw a dark head appear abruptly above the parapet close to that of the sentry—first a head, then two hands. The sentry crouched lower, and I saw him grasp a pair of shoulders.

There came next a sound of heavy breathing and scrabbling upon rough stones. The climber was astride the parapet—his profile illumined with the faint light from the embrasure.

I gave a gasp of astonishment.

For the man astride the parapet was Colonel Alistair Granby.

## CHAPTER XXI. I AM CONTENT WITH MY ESTATE

“GRANBY,” I whispered.

“Granby it is,” he said, climbing down from the parapet.

“Are you dressed to come away?”

“Give me two minutes.”

“Quick then. That is for Hilda too.”

I stepped back into the room and turned to find that Hilda had already slipped from the bed. In silence we made ready, while outside Granby’s voice alternated with that of the sentry in a crazy dialogue.



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"Of course you shall come with us."

That was Granby.

"To freedom and the light of day," said the sentry. "Goethe cried for light . . . *mehr Licht*. . . . That is what I also need. More light and courage."

"You shall have, both," responded Granby.

Granby's head appeared shortly through the tapestry.

"Ready?" he asked.

"We are ready," I replied.

I climbed after Hilda through the embrasure and we found ourselves on the *chemin de ronde*. The moon showed the castle spread below us; but where we stood, on the top of the tower, was in shadow.

"Heinrich," said Granby, "you shall go first."

He was speaking to a shadow beside him and for an instant I saw the outline of a man against the battlement, dressed, as were the other assassins of that strange castle, in the Nazi uniform.

"Who is he?" I whispered.

"No time to explain now," said Granby.

"Can you climb down the rope, Hilda?"

"Of course," she answered, "but how will father manage it?"

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"The Graf is here?" said Granby, astonished.

"In the second room below."

"That is bad," said Granby. "Down with you, Heinrich," he continued in German.

"Down into the pit," said the man.

"Down there you will be free," responded Granby.

"Free," repeated the man.

His black form was over the parapet as he spoke, looking for an instant like some gigantic toad squatting upon the stone rim of a pool. Then he disappeared and only the creaking of the rope marked his descent.

"You next," said Granby. "It is nothing. Only a hundred feet. Keep in the shadow when you are at the bottom and look to Heinrich. Keep him quiet, for heaven's sake, if you can. He will be holding the rope steady for you. If anything unexpected happens, remember that there is a car at the top of the road, underneath the big beech."

"And the police?" I asked.

"The police are warned, but not for to-night," he made answer.

Hilda brushed past me. The rope had ceased to creak. She took it and began moving down

hand over hand. I crouched by the parapet watching.

"You next," said Granby.

"But the Graf," I protested.

"Do as you are told," said Granby. "The Graf is my job."

"On the first floor, below the room with the chains," I said.

"Down with you," repeated Granby.

I laid my hand on the rope and began to slide. I was in deep shadow and kept my face to the wall. Presently the jerking of the rope showed me that Granby was climbing down above me. The night was very still. Down I went steadily, my knees and ankles brushing against the rough stone of the wall. Soon I passed another embrasure—the room of the chains. I carried on down the rope and, as I did so, my feet encountered a ledge which seemed to run right and left round the tower.

Then, with terrible suddenness, two things happened. A light shone out beneath my feet. It streamed from a window in the tower and came from the room in which the Graf von Esseling was confined. At the same instant I heard voices from somewhere above my head, and the rope began to slip.



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“ They are casting loose.”

Granby's voice came down to me from somewhere just above my head. My feet were upon the ledge. I had the sense to let go the rope and dig my fingers into the crevices of the stone, clinging to the rough wall like a limpet. It was not really such a bad position. I had done a good deal of rock climbing and the stones, provided they did not crumble, were good. I had fortunately made myself secure when Granby landed with one foot on my left shoulder. The other followed to my right, and hardly had he attained this position, than the rope slipped away noiselessly between my legs.

The silence of the night was broken. There came more shouting from above, and then a series of shots. Granby now had his knees on my shoulders, and with one hand was lightly gripping my head. Spread-eagled, our faces to the wall, we clung. We could move neither up nor down, but only sideways.

“ They can't hit us from up there ”—Granby's voice was low in my ear. “ The parapet juts from the top of the tower. Their bullets are missing us by a yard. I am going to climb down over you and see if I can make the window. Hold on. It's our only chance.”

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I braced myself against the wall, as with infinite precaution Granby began to descend. First he placed his hands on my shoulders, and then removed his knees, gripping me round the waist. Then he slid very slowly and carefully over my back. My hands were growing numb, but the holds were good. I tried to imagine that I was somewhere on the Grand Gable or le Petit Charmoz. I should wake in a minute and find myself swinging down a dusty path into Chamonix, eager for the draught of beer which would reward a long hot day spent upon the heights. Granby gripped me by the ankles now. I could not see what he was doing, but guessed that he was swinging his feet groping for the embrasure beneath, from which the light still streamed.

“Put out the light,” I heard him say. “Put out the light.”

The light went out suddenly, and at the same moment the pressure on my ankles was relaxed. Then, as though we had shifted to another world, utter silence fell. There were no more shots from the tower—nothing at all to be heard but the drumming of the blood in my ears.

I was still spread-eagled against the wall, hanging between the tower and an unmeasured



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depth below. How long the silence endured I do not know. It was broken at last by the sound of heavy breathing. Someone was crouching by the embrasure immediately below me. Then came a strange order—it had a nightmare quality :

“Get under the bed.”

The words were followed by a sharp crack and the whine of a bullet as it sped through the embrasure.

The ledge supporting my feet must be made to support my hands. I must follow Granby. I let go my left handhold and bent my knees, discovering as I did so that the ledge was fortunately broader than it had seemed at first. Soon my hands touched it and gripped hard. Then I let myself go full length on my arms and found myself bumping against the embrasure. I could now rest on its lower rim and could just peer into the room. But it was utterly dark inside. I could see and hear nothing for the moment.

I crouched there straining my ears. Was that heavy breathing mine or another's? I moved cautiously, and, in doing so, slipped forward and lost my balance. In the darkness I had misjudged the width of the stone. Even as I struggled desperately to regain my balance on the



sill, there came a crack and a flash of orange flame from the room.

For an instant I was aware of myself falling inward, not outward, and then I crashed into the room to meet oblivion shot with stars.

I came to myself to find that I was lying on my head and right shoulder, my face pressed against a rough mat, my feet still caught in the ledge of the embrasure. The room was spinning.

I turned over with a groan and put my hand to my head, bringing it away wet. Then I rolled over to my left shoulder, for my right was aching painfully, and pulled my legs down, so that I was half-lying, half-sitting on the mat. There were now lights in the room, for two candles were shining on a wooden table beside the bed. On the bed a figure was lying and, bending over it, two men, whom I recognised, at first vaguely and then with all my senses alert, as Granby and the Graf von Esseling.

I got to my feet and moved across the room. My head was clear again and, indeed, when I approached the bed, I forgot my ills, for the man stretched out before me was Francis Wyndham and the spreading stain upon his chest showed that he was near to death. From his mouth came

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the thin whistle of a man shot through the lungs. But his eyes were bright and fixed on Granby.

“Good shot, Colonel.”

He shifted a moment and his hand, which was on Granby's shoulder, tightened its grip, so that he raised himself slightly.

Granby moved and placed his arm about his shoulders.

“Speak, man,” he said, bending down to his ear. “Make what amends you can.”

The glazed eyes of Wyndham shifted from Granby. There came a smile upon his mouth and a whisper of words that trailed away into silence.

“And let me rail so high, That the false housewife Fortune break her wheel, Provoked by my offence.”

And so he died.

Granby laid him back and stood away from the bed.

“Quick,” he said, “we must go now by the door.”

“You will come, sir?” he added, turning to the Graf von Esseling.

The old man was fully dressed. He stood in the room of death tall and gaunt.

“My daughter?” he asked.

"She should be waiting below," replied Granby.

He was bending again over Wyndham's body, and I heard a jingle of keys. Then he moved to the door and opened it.

"Keep to the wall," he said, "and follow me."

He sped down the winding stair and I heard the turning of the lock as he opened the door at the bottom.

"Come, sir," I said, and, followed by the Graf, I too descended the stairs. The great hall was dark save for the moonlight which streamed through two of its windows.

Granby was crossing the room and we followed.

Then abruptly we stopped. One moment we were slipping wide-eyed through the shadowy room; the next we stood, smitten and dazzled. For a bright light shone suddenly from a brass chandelier hanging in the middle of the ceiling, and, at the same time, a familiar voice broke upon our ears.

"Colonel Granby."

We turned as one man.

Standing by the green baize door leading to the modern part of the house was Ruggiero. He was still in his evening clothes, the collar of his coat being of green velvet, and his beard



streamed out across his chest—Assurbanipal in modern dress. Granby made a sharp movement back to the door by which we had entered, but the voice of the Mighty One was sharper.

“No, Colonel. Nothing foolish.”

I looked round and perceived, framed in the door from which we had just emerged, the white head of du Bertrand. Our retreat was cut off.

Du Bertrand carried an automatic. I inferred from his flushed face and heavy breathing that he had come down from the summit of the tower, and that it was he who had cast loose the rope and fired upon us from the *chemin de ronde*.

So we stood a moment, Ruggiero stroking his beard and enjoying to the full his triumph.

Where was Hilda? That was the most vital point of all.

I was not left long in doubt, for, even as I asked myself the question, there came a rattle of bolts from the main door to the castle, which opened to disclose two fantastic figures as from some nightmare film of Pabst or Cavalanti. They were dressed entirely in black and their heads were round, like the knobs on the end of a bedstead, for they were wearing the crash helmets of motor cyclists. In the midst of them was Hilda. One of them had her by the wrist.

Then I saw something else, for outside, beyond them, some fifty yards away perhaps across the courtyard, dreadfully distinct in the moonlight, stood a dark tree. A great branch of it stretched across the beginning of the road that led down the hill away from the castle and, from the branch, suspended like an evil fruit, a dark figure swung and twisted in the air.

I was brought to myself by a sound from Hilda. In an instant, forgetting everything, I was beside her and she clung to me, her self-control for the moment broken. As I tried to comfort her, I heard, with but half an ear, a vile litany of question and response between Ruggiero and the hooded men.

“How did you find them?”

“They were in a small car moving down the road.”

“Any resistance?”

“From Heinrich, yes.”

“You have dealt with him?”

“He has died the death of a traitor.”

The two figures saluted, with a mechanical precision, and turned as one man. A moment later the quiet night outside was shattered by the start of their engines. My last sight of them was of two lean black figures crouching low over

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their throbbing machines. One of them swerved slightly to avoid, as he sped, the dangling feet of his victim.

"Now, Colonel," said the voice of the Mighty Magistro, "it is time we made an end. But first I think, do you not, that Mrs. Briercliffe would be more at ease on the sofa with her father. And Mr. Briercliffe would perhaps be good enough to close the door. The night is cold and yonder tree in the courtyard is an ill sight."

I was past retort and, as Hilda seated herself in silence with her father on the big sofa by the wide hearth, I crossed obediently and busied myself with the great door.

I turned to find that du Bertrand was addressing Granby.

"To the point, Colonel," he said. "I must infer that you have found out all that you needed to know concerning our plans."

"Quite," said Granby, warily affable.

"But being here with us, you have not been able to make use of your knowledge."

"Not so fast," said Granby. "To be one of your assassins might almost be described as a whole-time job; but I have had a moment now and then to myself."



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"You mean that the police have been warned?"

"They have just possibly an inkling."

"And may turn up here at any moment and arrest us all?"

"I shouldn't be surprised."

Du Bertrand turned to Ruggiero.

"What do you say to that?" he asked.

The Mighty One wagged his great head playfully.

"That," he said, with a sarcasm as ample as his presence, "would explain why Colonel Granby chose to try his hand, alone and unaided, at a rescue. Any other man, with the police at his disposal, would have chosen a simpler method of approach. But the Colonel has a natural love of desperate courses."

Du Bertrand nodded.

"The point is well taken," he said. "If Colonel Granby were in touch with the police he would have summoned them to his assistance this evening."

Du Bertrand turned back to us.

"Colonel Granby, you have played well and boldly. But you have lost the game."

"But this is not yet the end," said Granby quietly. "There are still two days to run. The Reichstag meets on the 7th."

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Du Bertrand smiled.

“The end is sooner than you think, Colonel. There is a telegram on the table beside you.”

I perceived at once a subtle change in Granby's manner—very slight, but, to one who knew him well, quite unmistakable. He picked up the telegram.

“Read,” said du Bertrand.

Granby read :

“President of German Reich has summoned Reichstag to meet in extraordinary session to-morrow at 11 a.m., October 6th—not on October 7th as previously announced. Chancellor will drive in semi-state to opening ceremony. None of the arrangements previously described will in any way be modified.”

Granby threw down the telegram. He looked squarely at du Bertrand, and I was astonished to see that the latter, returning Granby's gaze, had also quite unmistakably changed. Granby had received a shock; du Bertrand had noticed it and, oddly enough, was alarmed by his enemy's discomfiture.

There was a short silence, during which no

one moved. I often see that scene as it stood during that full pause. Granby, his eyes impenetrable, very alert and still, fighting his dismay; Hilda motionless beside her father on the sofa; Ruggiero trying hard to seem not too far out of his depth; the firelight flickering on the Raising of Lazarus and the black door barred against the horror that swung in the night air just outside.

"I see now what you have done," said du Bertrand at last. "Had you instructed the police to raid us here, this change of date would mean nothing to you. Nor would you have waited till your friends were unexpectedly put in peril of their lives. Had you, on the contrary, as a moment ago I believed, not yet communicated with the police at all, it would be of little moment to you whether my assassins were to strike to-morrow or the following day. But this news has shattered you. You hide it well, but I am a reader of men and I know exactly how you felt just now when you read that telegram, Colonel Granby. The change of date has destroyed you and the inference is clear. You laid your plans to take my men in the act of accomplishing their mission—perhaps at the castle gate, perhaps even later. That would have been a master-stroke.



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But my men have started, Colonel. You have played too high and the stakes are forfeit."

I have only a vague idea of what immediately followed. I remember seeing the Graf von Esseling on his feet, deadly pale, with Hilda clinging to his arm. I remember how Granby stood, still as a stone, facing du Bertrand. But I remember even more vividly my own swift vision of the desperate men who had gone forth on their dreadful mission. I saw again in my mind's eye the mimic scene in the riding-school: heard again the stream of shots and the voice from on high, stood again before the great book upon the lectern and listened to the words of one, William of Tyre, written eight hundred years ago.

Then, suddenly, it seemed that Ruggiero was speaking, urgently and, in his turn, afraid and shaken.

"But the cars may even yet be stopped," he was saying. "If the police have had news of the change they will strike at once."

Du Bertrand looked at the jewelled watch upon his wrist.

"Small fear of that," he said calmly. "We had the news well in advance of the official agencies. Our men are by now in the air. They

will descend before dawn and scatter to hiding. Not all the police in the world can track them down and, though one or more be taken, sufficient will remain for our purpose. To-morrow, Colonel Granby, there will not remain in this land any relic of authority to which you may appeal. *Vicisti Galliam.*"

I hardly dared to look at Granby as du Bertrand brought his speech to a rising conclusion. When I did, at last, shoot a glance at him, I was amazed to find that he was not listening. He was all ears, but it was for something else—something which to the rest of us only became audible when du Bertrand ceased and then immediately died away in its turn.

Was it my fancy or was that a whisper of tyres upon the gravel outside?

Ruggiero had heard the sound and, even as he looked towards the door which I had closed, but not bolted, it was flung wide.

Du Bertrand sprang to attention, his pistol levelled.

Then, with a cry of surprise, he lowered it; for over the threshold came a company of black-shirted figures.

"Ruggiero," he called, "what is the meaning of this?"

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“A mutiny,” was the thought that crashed through my mind.

Two of the men had reached Ruggiero. In a flash they were upon him, but, even before they had him fast, I had recognised one of the men who was coming towards du Bertrand.

He had entered behind his companions and he wore the uniform of the Munich police, being none other than the man who had given me my orders when first I had gone to Rheinau.

“Well done,” said Granby. “Oh, well done.”

Du Bertrand, at point of being taken, looked swiftly about him. His eye was caught by the tall figure of the Graf von Esseling, who stood with eyes agleam and triumph upon his face, ten paces away from us all.

Deliberately du Bertrand raised his pistol.

I was aware of a small figure that leaped towards the Graf as du Bertrand lifted his weapon. It was Granby, who had flung himself forward into the line of fire. Following the report he stood a moment, twisted a little towards the point of the smoking pistol and fell without a sound at our feet.



## EPILOGUE

I WRITE this in the pleasant library of Königstal. There is a great fire roaring on the hearth and, outside, the woods are covered with snow. Before the fire lies Granby, sorely hurt but still in the land of the living. The blue eyes will still twinkle in the gaunt face, though it will be months before he can walk. On the further side, over against him, sits Julia his wife, and there is great content upon their faces. For Granby has this morning received a letter from the man in Whitehall known to the Service as P.B.3. No longer will Granby bear the heat of the day. He has been received on the General Staff, and henceforth will send other men forth, of whom I fear I shall be one, to pull his chestnuts from the fire.

Of the great conspiracy there is little I need to write. The police had received early news of the change of date. They had intercepted the cars not far from the castle gate, and had stripped the men of their liveries in order the better to surprise the castle of infamous delights. Ruggiero is behind bars and his assassins are at rest in various State asylums in Germany. The great

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conspiracy of du Bertrand is now a matter of official record and reticence. The Sigma Works are in liquidation and the public imagines that its failure is a minor crash following on the disaster of Ivar Kreuger. Only we who are of the Service know the full truth of the matter. Du Bertrand is an outlaw. He will never set foot again on the soil of the country he so madly served, and only his high record saved him from the humiliâtion of a State trial and a prompt despatch to Devil's Island.

I have had many a quiet talk with Granby since the night on which he fell shot through the chest in the great hall.

First he told me of his fight with Wyndham in the round tower.

"We entered it simultaneously," he said. "I came in by the window and Wyndham came in by the door. The Graf with great presence of mind upset the candelabra just as Wyndham fired his first shot. Then we had one of those old lantern and dagger affairs. We prowled round the dark room and tried to hear each other. Wyndham was out to kill and so was I. It was pitch dark. The Graf, I hoped, was under the bed. Then we heard you at the embrasure and Wyndham, thinking to put a bullet through the

## EPILOGUE

reinforcements, fired again. That was his undoing. It gave me his whereabouts and I fired at the flash."

It seemed that for the previous forty-eight hours Granby had lived as one of the assassins. Heinrich, afraid of the orders he might receive, had been looking for a chance to leave the castle and Granby, working upon his fears, had offered to take his place. He had gone to the clinic of Dr. Axius in the guise of a pedlar. The servants had sent him away, but not before he had contrived to see Heinrich and to hand him a message concealed in a packet of cigarettes. Thereafter they had met in secret, Granby urging that the way of salvation lay, not through the Palace of Delights or the drill hall of the assassins, but in the hard path of work and honesty.

"Soon," said Granby, "I had prevailed on him to part with his second uniform. The men in the clinic were all more or less drugged. They did not notice a stranger, dressed as themselves, and I took good care to keep out of the way of persons in authority. I soon learned all that was necessary."

Granby had then acted exactly as du Bertrand had afterwards inferred. He had discovered that the cars would start for Berlin on the night of



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October 6th and there had been no reason why he should strike sooner. Suddenly, however, he had learned of my capture with Hilda and of the doom that awaited us at dawn. He had thus been obliged to act at once and to act alone.

One of the oddest features of our tale is that the message for which we had toiled and plotted never came to the light of day till after all was finished. We found it at Königstal and, with the help of Granby's code books, I deciphered it, sitting beside his bed, the windows of his room open to the great park. We then learned that du Bertrand, as a prelude to the final act of his assassins, had set on foot an organised conspiracy, crazily elaborate and devilish beyond belief, to undermine public confidence in the essential public services of a great nation.

Here is the message as I was at last able to set it down in plain terms :

“The Sigma cigarettes and the Sigma chocolate contain an ester of morphine. Du Bertrand is mad. Distribution is effected principally to men in key positions—engine-drivers, airmen, motor-drivers, Government servants, seamen, etc. The organisation is controlled by Wyndham and Ruggiero.

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Wyndham does the selling and Ruggiero the distribution. Victims of the organisation, once the habit has been formed, are supplied by agents peddling the drug at low prices. Du Bertrand is surprised that the authorities should pay so much attention to machines and neglect to examine the men in control of them. He thinks they must soon discover what is wrong, but the volume of accidents is daily increasing and he hopes to demoralise Germany completely. (See annex for principal centres of distribution.)

"There is a final stroke in preparation, but I have not yet discovered what it may be. They know everyone and they have agents everywhere, paying special attention to the French and German secret agents.

"Personal. I am writing this in code. I think du Bertrand suspects that I intend to give him away. I am to see him here this evening in the library. I shall try to discover more. To-morrow . . ."

Thus ended the message on the first word of a sentence that was never to be completed. For Françoise of the yellow hair there had been no to-morrow. I see her in my mind's eye, taken

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by surprise, hastily thrusting her message into the book of Tristan. Clearly she had never had an opportunity of retrieving it or of explaining to Monnier what it contained. All she had been able to scrawl at the last was a musical phrase and a shelf number—the message which had reached its destination, too late, by so horrid and devious a passage.

And so it ends—this strange history of my summer leave—except for that part of it that I trust will endure for ever. For, as I write, I see Hilda walking up the avenue in her furs. Her cheeks are flushed in the keen air, and my heart leaps as I go to meet her.

She comes to the window and, as I rise to, open it :

Full is mine herte of reveil and solace.

THE END



